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the
TARA STORY READERS

THE CATTLE RAID OF COOLEY

CHARLES SQUIRE

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"HE SEIZED MAND IN HIS ARMS, AND DASHED HIM
AGAINST A STANDING STONE"

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Boys like to read of heroes and of their deeds, but too often they are allowed to feed their fancy with tales of adventure in which true heroism plays no part. I am happy in being the medium through which a far different kind of story is put before our boys. It gives us the noblest form of heroism known to man,—that of a princely youth putting forth superhuman efforts in defending the homes of his people against invaders.

The story is one of many which cluster around Concubar, the renowned King of Ulster, and his no less renowned lieutenants, the Knights of the Red Branch.

There can be no doubt that amongst these tales, preserved for us in manuscript for ages, poets, novelists, and dramatists will by and by find material for enduring works.

H. P. C.

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CHAPTER I

HOW CONNAUGHT MADE WAR UPON ULSTER FOR THE SAKE OF A BULL

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THIS great war, which is called in the Irish books *Tain Bó Chudailgne*, the "Cattle Raid of Cooley", started, as so many wars have done, from a very slight beginning. It was an idle conversation between Ailell, King of Connaught, and Maive, his queen, that led up to it. Sitting, one morning, in their royal house at Cruachan, Ailell was rash enough to remark complacently that, though Maive had been a good queen to him, it had been the luckiest day of her life when he married her, and at once the proud woman, always ready for a quarrel, flared up. She retorted by enumerating to her husband the different wooers of princely rank who had sought her in marriage, and declared that she had accepted Ailell, and not one of the others, only because she did not wish to have a husband who was superior to herself. "For when I was the unmarried daughter of Ecca Airem, High-King of Ireland," she said, "I had an army of my own, fifteen hundred sons of Irish chiefs and fifteen hundred foreign mercenaries, and I made war at my own will. And, as for Connaught, it was my father's vassal-state, and he gave it to me, so that I hold it in my own right, with no thanks to you, and that is why I am called 'Maive of Cruachan'."

"Not so," replied Ailell, "for I also am of royal

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blood. My two brothers are kings of Tara and Leinster, while I hold Connaught by right of my mother, Mata; so that the province is not yours, as you say, but my own. And I am also braver than you, and richer, and more generous."

"Indeed, you are nothing of the kind," retorted Maive. "You are brave, I grant, for I would not have a man who was not so for my husband, but I am just as brave as you are; and you are generous, for I would not submit to be married to a stingy man, but you are not a whit more generous than I am. Surely it is no reproach to you that I should be brave and generous, so long as you are not my inferior in courage and liberality. We are equal in those virtues, while as for property, you are no richer than myself. Indeed, I suspect that you are less so."

"I am surprised to hear that," returned Ailell, "for it is common knowledge that I am the richest man in Ireland."

"Well, do not let us argue about it any more," said Maive, who scented diversion, "but let us gather all our possessions together, and put them side by side, and have them valued."

So Ailell ordered all his various property to be collected, and put in heaps, and Maive did the same. The assayers counted the rings, brooches, pins, and other ornaments, and they were found to be equal in weight, quality, and value. The rich garments of crimson, blue, yellow, black, green, buff, pied, and striped were told over; and it could not be said that either side had the advantage over the other. The household vessels of iron and copper, the drinking-cups and goblets of silver and bronze, were counted,

and Maive's share and Ailell's were found equal. Then the cattle were driven in from the fields, and paraded before the palace, and, whether they were sheep or pigs or horses, it was just the same; not only were they equal in number, but in quality; if among Ailell's beasts there was an especially fine ram or boar, or a horse of unusual beauty and value, one equal to it could be found among the beasts of Maive. It was only when they came to count the horned cattle that any advantage could be discovered.

Even that was not noticeable at first; for the herds were equal in number and breed. The difference was in one bull alone, a creature so splendid that Maive had nothing to set beside him. She did not know that it had been born among *her* cattle and had gone of its own will into her husband's pastures, and if Ailell knew—and there is no reason to suppose he did—he kept his own counsel. The bull was something of a magic beast, and, feeling it beneath its dignity to belong to a woman, it had, while still a calf, eluded Maive's herdsmen and joined the cattle of the king. It had now grown to full age, and was famous as the "White-horned Bull of Connaught". So that its presence turned the scale, and Maive was so annoyed at not having another equal to it, that she felt, says the story, "as though she owned no penny's worth of stock".

But, never willing to be beaten, the proud queen determined not to be less than Ailell even in this. She sent for her herald, Mac Roth, and asked him if there were not somewhere in Ireland a bull equal to the White-horned.

"Surely there is," he replied. "Not only as good an one, but one twice as good. The 'Brown Bull

of Cooley' is his name, and he belongs to Daire of Cooley¹, over in Ulster."

"Will he sell the bull?" asked Maive.

"I hardly think so," answered the herald, "for the men of Ulster would not readily allow so precious a beast to leave their country."

"Go at once to him," said Maive, "and ask him to name his own price; and, if he has any fear of the Red Branch people, let him leave Ulster and come to Connaught, and I will give him lands equal to his own in the fair plain of Ai under my own protection."

Without delay the herald and nine messengers set out for Ulster, and came to where Daire, a rich farmer, lived. He received them hospitably, and asked their errand. When he heard it, he was so pleased, we are told, that he sprang about on his couch until the seams burst under him.

"On such terms," he cried, "the Brown Bull shall go to Connaught, whether the men of Ulster like it or not."

To prove his good-will, he entertained the messengers lavishly with beef and ale—too lavishly, in fact, for presently their tongues began to wag.

"This is a good man in whose house we are," said one of them.

"Good enough," replied another; "but what makes you say so?"

"I call him a good man," returned the first, "to give us a thing which all Ireland could not have taken against his will—I mean the Brown Bull of Cooley."

"May you choke for saying that!" retorted the

¹ In Irish, *Cualgne*.

other, an ill-grained, churlish fellow. "If he had not yielded it freely, Maive would have taken it by force in Ulster's teeth."

Just as this was said, Daire's steward came in with two servants laden with meat and drink. Full of anger at what he heard, he ordered the men to place the food and liquor upon the table, but without any invitation to the guests to partake of it, and went straight back to find Daire.

"Is it true," he asked, "that you are going to give up to Maive that priceless possession, the Brown Bull?"

"It is quite true," he replied.

"Then what her men are saying must be true also," retorted the steward.

"What is that?" asked Daire.

"They are saying that you are wise to give it up, for if you did not do so with some show of free-will, Maive would soon take it by force."

"They say that!" cried Daire in a fury. "Then, by the gods of Ulster! Maive had better come and take it, for now she will get it in no other way."

Daire of Cooley brooded over the insult all night long, and, the next morning, when Mac Roth and the nine messengers came to him to get the bull, he was more angry than ever.

"It is lucky for *you*," he told them, "that I do not lay my hands upon heralds or messengers, for, if I did, not one of you would go back alive."

"Why, what has happened to you since last night?" exclaimed Mac Roth, who had heard nothing about his men's talk.

"A great deal has happened," replied Daire. "Did you not say that, though I might not wish to sell the

bull, I should be forced to do so through fear of Ailell and Maive?"

"Never," replied Mac Roth.

"Then it was said by your servants," continued Daire, "which shows that it must have been common talk at Cruachan."

"That is not true," replied Mac Roth. "And I do not think it right of you to take notice of what is said by common messengers after they have been made merry with your meat and drink. Whatever they may have said was only their own foolishness. Such a thought never came into the mind either of Ailell or of Maive."

"That is as it may be," retorted Daire. "But you will not get the bull now."

Nor could Mac Roth persuade him to alter his mind, and Maive's embassy went back crestfallen to Cruachan, and announced the failure of their mission. Curiously enough, Maive did not think of blaming them.

"There is no need to read the matter like a riddle," she said. "I can see that they never meant to sell it to us at all. But, since they wish to have it taken by force, I swear that I will not wear silk, or drink out of a golden cup, until I have brought the Brown Bull out of Ulster."

Great preparations were made for war. Messengers were sent over all Ireland to rally Maive's allies and vassals. Six of her sons each brought a battalion. Ailell's brothers came each with three thousand men. Besides these, there were the exiles from Ulster who had forsworn King Conachar because of his treachery towards the sons of Usnach. Over the whole host Maive placed Fergus son of Roy as leader-in-chief, partly

because of his knowledge of Ulster, and partly because of the quarrel she knew that he had with King Conachar.

For a fortnight they remained before Cruachan, assembling, resting, and feasting. During this time, Maive sent her spies to Emain Macha to find out how things were going with the Ultonians. For a weakness used to come upon the warriors every year which made them for many days at a time as unwarlike as women, and no one except Cuchulainn was exempt from it. Students of primitive customs have tried to explain this periodical inaction as some tribal rite, but the Irish books say that it was the result of a curse passed upon Ulster by the war-goddess Macha in days long gone by. At any rate, Maive had been cunning or lucky enough to gain the advantage of it. Her spies returned, reporting that the great warriors of the Red Branch were stretched upon their couches, too faint to ride in chariots or carry arms.

So Maive started with her army, and marched to within a day's journey of Ulster. Here they camped and lit their fires, so that the country seemed as though covered with a pall of smoke. The next morning, she rose early, mounted her chariot, and went to consult her chief druid.

"Show me foreknowledge," she asked him. "Many a man has left his family and friends to go with me upon this journey, and not all will come back. But," she added, with the frankness characteristic of her, "there is no one whom I care more for than for myself. So tell me, whoever comes back or does not come back, shall I myself come back?"

"Whoever comes back or does not come back, you yourself will," replied the druid.

Pleased with this answer, the queen ordered her driver to return to the camp. As they went, a young girl met the chariot. She was wonderfully beautiful, with fair skin, blue eyes, red lips, and hair which almost touched the ground, and she was dressed in a green garment fastened with a golden brooch. The queen stopped to speak to her.

"Who are you, maiden?" she asked.

"I am called Fedelm¹, a fairy from the Fairy Hill near Cruachan, and therefore friendly to you and Connaught. I can reveal your fortune, and that of the four provinces of Ireland which are banded together against Ulster. Will you hear it?"

"Gladly," replied Maive. "Look into the future, and tell me how you see our army."

"I see crimson on it," replied the prophetess, "I see red."

"But that is impossible," answered the queen. "My spies have come back from Ulster, and say that Conachar is in his weakness. We need have no fear of him at all. Look again, Fedelm. Tell me how you see our army."

"I see it crimson; I see it red."

"But Ulster's warriors are all helpless within their *dúns*; my spies have been and seen them. Look again. Fedelm. How do you see our army?"

"I see it all crimson; I see it all red."

"I do not think much of your prophecy," replied the queen, "for everyone knows that, with so great a host as ours, there are likely to be some few accidents. Men may quarrel about precedence, and blood may be shed, but not by the Ultonians. Nay, tell me the truth. How do you see our army?"

¹ Pronounced *Faithleen*.

"I see it very crimson; I see it very red," insisted the fairy. "For I see," she cried, "a small man who will do wondrous feats of arms, though his skin be covered with wounds; the light of valour shines round his head, victory is written on his forehead; beautiful is his face and gentle is his way with women, but in battle he is a very dragon. From his appearance he would seem to be the Cuchulainn of whose fame I hear; who that 'Culann's Hound' is I do not know, but I know this, that he will make your army very red. He is setting out for war; yes, he comes to meet you now; certainly he is Sualtam's son, Cuchulainn. He will make great slaughter; countless heads will fall at his hand; your women will long be mourning those laid low by that hound of the smith whom I see before me now."

And, as the queen stared at her in amazement, Fedelm vanished like a ghost.

CHAPTER II

HOW CUCHULAINN DREW "FIRST BLOOD" ON ULSTER'S ENEMIES

QUEEN MAIVE had thought herself very wise in choosing Fergus as the commander of her army, for he knew the tracks and paths of Ulster as few others did. But she had not counted upon that love of fatherland which so often makes a man continue to cherish his own country, even after it has wronged him. Fergus had not the heart to march into Ulster as an enemy, taking it unsuspecting, and, as it were, unarmed. He sent a messenger secretly to warn the Ultonians of the approach of Maive's forces, so that they might not be altogether surprised. Then he cast about for some means of delaying the army, so as to give them a little time to prepare.

Instead of guiding it straight on, he chose a track which led deviously towards the right, so that their course was in a half circle. By this means he hoped to lead them away from the Ulster borders without causing any suspicion. But, before the end of the day, Maive guessed what he was trying to do.

"You are leading us in a very strange way, Fergus," she said to him. "This cannot be the right road to Ulster. Be frank with me. Are you ignorant of the path? for if so, we can find someone else to guide us; or are you acting the traitor towards us?"

Fergus was at his wits' end for a reply, but he found one.

"I am not really leading you wrong," he said, "whatever I may seem to be doing. I am going out of the direct course for a good reason, to avoid passing through the province of Muirthemne, so that we may not meet the great man who holds it."

"And who is that?" asked Maive, suspiciously.

"My foster-son, Cuchulainn, son of Sualtam," replied Fergus.

None the less he was obliged to turn towards Ulster again. He made another circuit, which brought the army back in the afternoon to a camping-ground only a short distance from the place it had left in the morning. Thus a day was lost by Connaught, to the gain of Ulster. There was time for Cuchulainn to set out, and come in his chariot to the frontier.

But Fergus dared not play the same trick a second time. The army marched on, and came to the borders of Ulster.

Here stood a pillar-stone, marking the boundary. To this they saw that something had been carefully fixed. Fergus approached it, and found that a ring of twisted oak-sapling had been placed round the stone. He took it off, and saw that it bore an inscription in the *ogam* character, an ancient Irish form of writing, something like the runic of the Norse. The letters of the alphabet were expressed by notches, long or short, cut into the wood of the outer side of the ring.

"Here is evidently a message for us," he remarked "Let us read it, and see what it says."

It proved to be a challenge to Maive's army, daring it to cross the frontier. Ailell and Maive and all the various leaders passed it from hand to hand. They discussed eagerly who could have placed it there, with-

out, however, coming to any decision, for it bore no name. The only man who could make a shrewd guess kept his thoughts to himself.

It was growing late now, so Maive decided to camp beside the stone, and cross over into Ulster upon the next day. A great storm of snow came that night, covering the country as high as the axle of a chariot, so they did not set about starting very early in the morning.

However, they pushed on at last, and crossed the boundary into Ulster. Their advance-guard of two men, Eirr and Indell, in their chariots, scouted ahead. Behind them, at a good distance, came the army in its various battalions, Maive's own men, her allies, and the Ulster exiles, every tribe led by its own chief. In front of all these went Maive in her chariot, surrounded by a body-guard of picked warriors: two before her and two behind, two on her right hand and two on her left.

Before they had gone very far, they saw with surprise the chariots of their two scouts returning. They wondered what they could have found on the road to bring them back so soon. But they were still more astonished to note how the chariots were moving, as though they were being either very carelessly or very unskilfully driven. When they came closer, it could be seen that they were not even being driven at all. The horses were moving of their own accord, and at their own pace, for though their masters and their drivers were in the chariots, they were all dead. There they sat, perched up on their cushions, but without any heads, while their ownerless horses slowly brought them back to their friends for burial.

So Maive and those about her now realized that Ulster was not quite so unprotected as they had

thought, and that whoever had placed the ring upon the pillar-stone was able to do more than merely threaten.

A second surprise was in store for them. Soon they came to a small river, to be crossed at a ford. Out of the shallow water stood what seemed at first sight to be a tree. But it had been stripped of all its boughs except four, which stood out like spikes. Each spike bore a severed and bleeding head, the heads of Eirr and Indell, and of Foich and Fochlam, their chariot-drivers.

It was here that they must have been killed, for the ground bore signs of a struggle. There were the tracks, too, of a single chariot, which had evidently come from the north, and had returned again. Its occupant had attacked the two scouts, killed and beheaded them, and quietly retired—no mean feat, for they were both good warriors—as Maive, somewhat discouraged, remarked to Fergus.

"For my own part," he replied, "I am not so much surprised at the quickness with which they were killed as at the tree which bears their heads. That tree must have been cut with a single sword-stroke; and the mere way it stands in the bed of the river is astonishing, for no hole was dug for it, it was thrown from a chariot into the water, and has stuck upright there."

With that, he took hold of the stake, and after much trouble, and with a great effort, dragged it out. As he had guessed, it had been cut with one blow.

"Who could have done this?" asked Ailell. "Con-achar, son of Nessa?"

"No," replied Fergus; "for he would not have come alone, but with a battalion."

"Was it Celthair, son of Uthecar?"

"No, he also does not travel except with a company."

"Was it Owen, son of Durthact?"

"No, or we should have seen the traces of the chariots which would follow him. It was none of them who did this, but, I should say, my foster-son of old times, Cuchulainn."

"We know of him," said Maive, "for we assigned him the Championship of Ulster. But is he so terrible as this?"

"You have not a man in your host to match him," returned Fergus. "He is a lion for battle, a raven for carnage, a point for piercing, a hammer for hitting, a strong door for resisting. You have no one to touch him in strength, in speed, in splendour, in fame, in triumphing, in causing terror. No man, did I say? Not any nine of your men would be his equal."

"Let it be so," replied Maive. "After all, he has only one body, like other people, and it can be killed, or wounded, or captured."

"If his deeds as a man are equal even to those he did as a boy, you will find that some trouble," returned Fergus.

And that evening he told round the camp-fire some of Cuchulainn's "boy-exploits"; how he had taken arms when only seven years old, and slain Nechtan Sceine's three fierce sons, and how he had learned the utmost skill of arms in the island of Scathach the Amazon.

CHAPTER III

HOW CUCHULAINN APPEARED BEFORE THE ARMY, AND CAUSED THE BREAKING OF CHARIOTS

BUT in spite of Fergus's reminiscences, Ailell and his queen were still unconvinced of Cuchulainn's extraordinary powers.

"Doubtless he took our two scouts by surprise," said Maive. "If they had met him face to face, the story would have had a different ending. All the more easily could he be overcome, if he himself were caught unsuspecting, and at odds."

So she went to one of her warriors, Fraech by name, and asked him to go quietly in search of Cuchulainn, and, by any means he could, make an end of him. Fraech gladly took up the adventure. He was a man of powerful build, and—what seems to have been a great advantage to an Irish warrior—he was as good a fighter in water as on dry land. He started off, with nine men, to look for his antagonist.

When at last he found him, he thought he was really in luck, for Cuchulainn was sitting in a deep pool of a stream, taking a bath, and had not yet seen Fraech. The Connaught warrior told his nine followers to wait for him until he returned, for he wished to have the sole glory of conquering Cuchulainn. Nor would he use arms, for he believed his own strength to be far greater than this boy's. He stripped naked behind some bushes, then ran to the pool where Cuchulainn

was washing himself, quite unsuspecting and unarmed. He did not even look up until Fraech was standing by him on the bank.

"Go back to your army," he said quietly, when at last he noticed him, "for I have no wish to take your life."

"But I have come to take yours," replied Fraech. "So give me fair play in the water, and fight me there."

"How?" said Cuchulainn.

"Each with one arm round the other," replied Fraech, "and a wrestle for the mastery."

They fought for some time, but at last Cuchulainn threw Fraech, and put his head under water. He still did not wish to harm him, so he lifted him up again.

"Yield, and I will let you go!" he said.

But Fraech refused, and Cuchulainn was obliged to drown him. Fraech's nine men took up his body, and bore it back to show to Maive. She was amazed when she saw how her strong champion had been put an end to, without even a scratch being made upon his skin, and began for the first time to have a wholesome fear of this strange "Hound of Culann".

It increased upon the next day. As the army moved along, suddenly a sling-stone came whistling through the air. It whizzed into Maive's chariot, striking her pet puppy-dog upon the head. It was the end of poor Baskin, and a narrow escape for herself. Then she saw Cuchulainn standing in front of them, waving his sling.

She called to her warriors to pursue, and they drove off at a furious gallop. But the running man easily out-distanced them. The chariots were scattered over the plain, several with poles broken from the violence of the pursuit.

It was necessary to halt, and repair the damage done. The owners of the injured vehicles looked about for timber from which new shafts might be cut. Among these was one of Maive's sons, called Orlam. He waited outside a small covert of hollies, while his driver went into the wood to choose and cut a new chariot-pole.

The driver was still looking for a suitable tree, when he heard someone coming through the wood behind him.

"What are you doing here?" asked the new-comer.

"I am trying to find a chariot-pole," replied the driver, "for we have broken ours, hunting that wild deer, Cuchulainn. Will you help me?"

"Willingly," said the other. "Shall *I* choose you one, or will *you* choose it and give it to me to clean?"

"I will choose the wood," replied the charioteer, "if you will strip it."

He cut a straight holly, and handed it over. Before long it was returned to him, trimmed and pared and ready for use. So neatly had the work been done that he looked with surprise at the stranger, then with suspicion, and last of all with a growing fear.

"Who are you?" he blurted out at last, "for I vow it was no ordinary man who trimmed the pole like this."

"I am that wild deer, Cuchulainn, you are hunting," was the answer. "But you need not be so frightened of me. I do not mean to hurt you. Only I must know this: Who is your master?"

"Orlam, a son of Ailell and Maive."

"Where is he?"

"Waiting in the hollow yonder, with his chariot."

"Then I will race you to him," said Cuchulainn, "and we will see whether you get there first to tell him I am coming, or whether I am there before you."

The man needed no further hint. He fled, with all his speed, to warn his unsuspecting master. But fast as he ran, Cuchulainn ran faster, and leaping into Orlam's chariot, struck off his head. Then he gave the trophy to the driver.

"Take it back," he said, "as a present from me to Ailell and Maive. I shall watch you, and if I see you turn aside from a straight line, a stone from my sling will come after you."

So the man was obliged to take the gruesome relic home, and tell the King and Queen of Connaught what had happened.

"Do not blame me," he pleaded, "for, if I had not brought it to you, my own head would have been off before now."

But the proud queen was not the person to grieve much over the loss of one of her many sons.

"Catching this Cuchulainn is not quite so easy as catching birds!" was all she said.

CHAPTER IV

HOW CUCHULAINN MADE A BARGAIN OF SINGLE COMBAT

QUEEN MAIVE was perhaps the less inclined to show any anger against her son's driver from having had experience herself of Cuchulainn's slinging. Soon she was to have more. As successor to the dead puppy-dog Baskin, she now had a pet squirrel with her in her chariot. A stone slung from far off hit it, and its fate was the same as the dog's. In bravado, she sent for a pet bird, and let it perch upon her shoulder. But it was struck dead by a stone which came, as it seemed, invisibly out of the air; and she did not have any more pets with her in the chariot after that.

The next morning Cuchulainn had a visitor. It will be remembered how Emer's father had offered her in marriage to a Munster chieftain; how, when the suitor came to woo her, she had begged him to give her up, and let her marry Cuchulainn, the man she really loved; and how he had consented to do so, for he was kind and honourable. The incident, told by Emer to Cuchulainn, had made the Ulster hero his firm friend. This was the man, Lugaid, son of Nois, who now came on a visit of peace to him.

"Welcome, Lugaid!" cried Cuchulainn, as soon as he caught sight of him. "Come and accept my hospitality. I am afraid it is not much I can offer you, but if I can shoot a duck, you shall have half of it, and if I can catch

a salmon, you shall have half that as well. And for seasoning there is marshwort and water-cress and seaweed, with cold water to drink. It is poor fare, but it is the best I have now."

"Do not trouble yourself to get it for me," replied Lugaid, "for you need all your strength. You have a hard task here, standing up alone against an army."

"It is hard work," agreed Cuchulainn, "but, if I can get fair play, I will take my chance. Now tell me the truth, Lugaid," he added laughingly. "Are not your fine troops a little afraid of me?"

"They are, indeed," Lugaid admitted. "There are few warriors who would care to stray far from the main army."

"They will have still more reason for it soon," replied Cuchulainn, "for I mean to use my sling on them. But I have not asked you yet, why you have come?"

"I have come to make a friendly compact with you," answered Lugaid. "If I secretly send you provisions, so that you need not waste your strength in getting food, will you promise to keep your hand off my own people?"

Cuchulainn agreed to this, and Lugaid went back.

But the Ulster champion kept his word about the slinging. All day, he crept around the outskirts of the army, harassing it. Even at night, his stones and pellets came thudding among the sleepers round the camp-fires. No man knew at what moment he might be struck down dead, and there was almost a panic every morning, as the losses were counted up.

Maive saw that her army was becoming demoralized by these attacks, which were at once so deadly and so

terrifying to warriors less accustomed to be shot at than to meet their enemies face to face. She decided to send a herald to Cuchulainn, to see if he could not be persuaded to hold his hand. And Ailell thought that if their solitary opponent were offered a lordship in the Plain of Ai, as extensive as his own domains in Muirthemné, with everything necessary to keep up a chieftain's state, he might even be induced to desert King Conachar, and come over to the side of Connaught. Both considered it worth a trial, and forthwith sent Mac Roth, in his herald's clothes, with his linen fillet and white hazel wand, to look for Cuchulainn.

It was not known exactly where he was, but Fergus thought that he would probably be by the sea-shore, refreshing himself by letting the sun warm and the wind cool him after so many nights without sleep. And there the herald found him. Laeg, who was keeping watch, saw him a long way off, and warned his master to be on his guard.

"The man has all the signs of a herald," said Cuchulainn, after scanning him. "Let him come in safety, and deliver his message."

When Mac Roth reached Cuchulainn, he still did not know for certain whether he had found the person he sought.

"In whose service are you, young man?" he asked.

"I am a vassal of Conachar, King of Ulster," was the reply.

"Then no doubt you can tell me where I shall find Cuchulainn."

"As to that," replied Cuchulainn, "whatever you have to say to *him*, you can say to *me*."

So Mac Roth gave him Maive's message and Ailell's

offer. "And you may tell him that he will be better off as their friend," he added, "than as vassal to a petty king like Conachar."

This was hardly the right way to deal with so proud a person as our hero.

"You may go back and tell Ailell and Maive," he said, "that I will neither sell my mother's brother, nor will I be vassal to a woman. I am Cuchulainn, for whom you were looking, and I refuse all your offers."

"But is there no bargain you will make?" asked Mac Roth.

"Yes," replied Cuchulainn, "there is; but I will not talk about it to *you*. There is a man in your camp with whom I will make it, but I shall not say who he is. You can guess that for yourselves, and if you send the right man, I will confer with him, but if you send any other, he will not come back to you alive."

So Mac Roth returned, glad to get away safe.

"Did you find Cuchulainn?" asked Maive.

"I found an angry boy by the sea-shore who said he was Cuchulainn," replied Mac Roth, "but whether he was or not, I do not know."

"Did he accept your offer?" asked Fergus.

"No, he refused it," replied the herald.

"Then you must go to him again," said Maive.

"Not I!" replied Mac Roth, "for all that any king or queen could offer me."

And he told them all that Cuchulainn had said. Fergus smiled.

"It was certainly Cuchulainn you talked to," he said. "And I can guess who it was he meant when he spoke of that one man. It is me he wishes to speak with, because I was his foster-father. So I will go and hear

what he has to say. But I do not move a step until I have your sworn promise that, whatever bargain he may make with you, you will keep your share of it."

"Be sure that we will do that," replied Maive and Ailell; "anything he may ask will be better for us than losing so many men from his sling."

So Fergus drove off, but he had not gone far before he heard another chariot following him. He looked round, and saw that it was one of the chiefs of Con-naught, a young man named Etarcomal, notorious for his arrogance.

"Why are you following me?" he called out to him.

"Because I wish to have a look at that famous Cuchulainn," was the reply.

"I do not want you to meet him," returned Fergus. "I know what your pride is, and I know the pride of Cuchulainn, and I know that no good can come of you two getting together."

"I shall be under your safeguard," grumbled Etarcomal. "Are you not willing to protect me?"

"I am," said Fergus, "if you behave properly, but not if you insult him."

"I will not even speak to him," Etarcomal promised. So Fergus let him come.

Cuchulainn and Laeg were playing chess when they arrived.

"Welcome, friend Fergus!" said Cuchulainn, as he rose to greet them. "Have you come to try my wild duck and salmon, with marshwort, water-cress, and seaweed, and a drink of water?"

"No," replied Fergus, "I have come with a message from Ailell and Maive; and I want your answer quickly, for, if I stay here long, they will say in the camp that I

have been plotting treachery with you. So what is that agreement you spoke of to our herald? Tell me, and I will put it before Ailell and Maive, who have promised to keep their own share of it faithfully."

"It is this," said Cuchulainn. "I offer to fight one picked man of them every day, hoping that I may continue to prevail until the Ultonians have recovered from their weakness; and, as long as I am able to meet him, the army must halt where it is now. If they keep to this faithfully, I will no longer attack them with my sling, or in any other way than by fighting their champions. But if the host moves on into Ulster, then my compact will be at an end, and I will harass them in every way I can. Those are my terms."

Fergus turned his chariot, and drove off without another word. But Etarcomal stayed behind, still staring at Cuchulainn.

"What are you looking at?" asked the hero, at length.

"At you," replied Etarcomal, rudely.

"It need not take so much time as you are giving to it," said Cuchulainn.

"You are right," returned Etarcomal. "There is not much to look at. Indeed, I see nothing to be afraid of, only a boy who is good at doing tricks."

"You may say anything you like to me," replied Cuchulainn, "because you are under my friend Fergus's protection. Otherwise I should have chopped you into four quarters by now."

"You need not brag too much in advance," sneered Etarcomal. "I heard your compact with Ailell and Maive. You have engaged to fight one of our champions every day. Very well; I will be the first to meet you."

Then he drove off, and on his way home told his driver how he had challenged Cuchulainn.

"I am going to fight him to-morrow," he said. "And I only wish it were to-day."

"It might just as well be," replied the too candid driver, "for, whenever you fight him, he is sure to kill you."

"You think so?" cried Etarcomal. "Then I will not wait until to-morrow. Turn the chariot. It shall be settled now."

Cuchulainn was somewhat surprised to see him again.

"Why have you come back?" he asked.

"To fight you," was the curt reply.

"But I have told you that I do not wish it," returned Cuchulainn. "So go back again."

"I am not going back," retorted Etarcomal, "until either I have taken your head or you have taken mine."

He sprang out of his chariot, and approached Cuchulainn. Both drew their swords. But before Etarcomal could strike a blow, Cuchulainn had practised upon him one of the feats he had learned from Scathach. With the "Under-cut" he neatly shore away the turf from beneath his antagonist's feet. Etarcomal slipped on the moving soil, and fell on his back.

"Get up," said Cuchulainn, "and follow Fergus. I am very loth to shed your blood."

"The blood of one of us must be shed," returned his stubborn enemy.

So Cuchulainn let him rise, and, as soon as he was standing, performed the "Edge-feat" on him, shaving off his hair with his sword as neatly as it could have been done with a razor, but without drawing a drop

of blood. But still the young man would not take the hint, and Cuchulainn was obliged at last to use the "Vertical stroke", and despatch him.

Fergus, who had missed his companion, came hurrying back just in time to see the blow. His anger rose against Cuchulainn.

"Is this the way," he cried, "to treat a boy who came out under my protection, only to look at you?"

"It was not my fault," replied Cuchulainn, "as his charioteer will tell you."

And Etarcomal's driver gave Fergus a true account of what had happened.

"He refused to go," added Cuchulainn, "until either he had taken my head or I had taken his. Which was best for me?"

"What has happened is best," replied Fergus. "So put him in the chariot."

When Maive knew, she reproached Fergus bitterly. But all he said was:

"The whelp should not have matched himself against the great hound. He was rightly dealt with for his insolence, and I tell you, Queen, that I myself was not sorry to get safely away from Cuchulainn in his anger."

CHAPTER V

HOW CUCHULAINN VANQUISHED SEVERAL STRONG CHAMPIONS

THAT night the army had peace. There were no stealthy midnight attacks; no "sniping", as a modern soldier would call it, with the deadly sling. Men slept quietly, and rose up in the morning unharmed. But Ailell and Maive had much to think about. Who was to go and fight Cuchulainn?

Evidently it must be a good warrior—one, indeed, of their best champions. And he must be promised great gifts to induce him to risk his life. Maive sent for her herald, and ordered him to proclaim to the army the reward which would be given to Cuchulainn's conqueror. It was to be the same that she had already offered to her enemy himself, as a bribe to desert Ulster—a chieftain's portion in the rich Plain of Ai, under her own especial friendship and favour. Then, lest even this should fail to tempt an already wealthy champion, she added a second, even more enticing, offer. For the head of Cuchulainn was to be exchanged the hand of the beautiful Finnevar, Ailell and Maive's fairest daughter.

Such an offer readily brought out aspirants. Many, too, of the old practised warriors of Ireland were still inclined to laugh at our hero's prowess. They did not think it likely that a boy without a beard could prevail in open fight over war-hardened men. Hitherto

he had been lucky in his antagonists; had perhaps taken them unawares! Now it would be face to face! Nadcrantal, a well-known fighting-man, took up the challenge with jests.

Moreover, he was prepared to back up his jests with deeds. He would not even bear his real warrior's arms, but chose nine spits of holly, each sharpened and fire-hardened into a rude spear such as hunters or fowlers used. With these he started out to look for Cuchulainn.

He was not long in finding him, and really engaged in the same pursuit as he himself pretended. Some wild fowl were feeding on the plain, and Cuchulainn was stalking them. He let Nadcrantal come close up to him, apparently too busy with his sport to notice. Maive's champion took aim, and flung his rustic spear, and only then did Cuchulainn look round. Before the weapon could touch him, he caught it in mid-air, drove it into the earth, and performed his feat of standing upon its point. Then, leaping to the ground, he hurled his own weapon at one of the birds, and brought it down.

Nadcrantal was surprised, but put down this cool conduct of Cuchulainn's to a young man's recklessness. He flung his eight other darts in turn, but Cuchulainn caught each of them, and performed some juggler's trick with it. Then, seeing that Nadcrantal had no more weapons, and that the birds had moved on, he ran lightly off in pursuit of them. Nadcrantal did not follow, but went back in high glee.

"It was as I thought," he boasted. "When he saw a proper warrior, the boy ran!"

"It was not like Cuchulainn to run away," remarked Fergus, when he heard it.

"Nevertheless, he did run," answered Naderantal.

The son of Roy took counsel with the rest of the Ulster exiles, who were amazed and incredulous at what Naderantal had said. All agreed that, if it were true, this cowardice on the part of Ulster's champion was a slur upon them all. The honour of the province of their birth was, in spite of everything that had happened, more to them than the success of the one they had adopted. They decided to send some one to Cuchulainn to find out the truth, and, if necessary, to reproach him for so lowering Ulster's glory, and implore him to make a stand. The man they chose to go with the message was called Fiacha Mac Firaba.

But if Fiacha had really thought to find Cuchulainn ashamed or skulking, he must have been agreeably surprised. So far from giving explanations, the Ulster hero seemed to expect them.

"I do not understand what you mean," he said, "or what Naderantal is talking about. If he had done the spear-feats which I did, he might have something to boast of. But he could not have come meaning to fight me, for he came without weapons. Surely he knows that I do not attack unarmed men. If he really means fighting, let him come again to-morrow properly armed. I will be at the same place, and, however early he may get there, he will find me waiting for him."

So Fiacha went back to Naderantal with the message.

Early the next morning, Naderantal started in his chariot, accompanied by Fergus, who had come to watch the fight. Evidently Maive's champion was now beginning to take Cuchulainn seriously, for, in order that he might begin the fight as fresh as possible, he was not wearing his heavy arms and armour, which

were brought separately in a wagon. Still more must he have been impressed when they reached the meeting-place, and he saw his enemy. He could not recognize in him now the smooth-faced boy he had seen chasing birds. Cuchulainn's battle-fury (a madness like that of the Norse Berserks) had come upon him, and, in one of its paroxysms, he had broken a pillar-stone, and caught up part of it in the folds of his cloak. Thus he stood waiting, a grim sight.

"Can this really be Cuchulainn?" Nadcrantal asked Fergus.

"Certainly it is," was the reply.

"He did not look like that yesterday," said the astonished warrior.

Nevertheless he put on his heavy armour, and approached his enemy.

"In what way shall we fight?" he asked.

"In whatever way you like," replied Cuchulainn.

"Then I will first hurl my sword. Escape it if you can."

But Cuchulainn made no effort to avoid the weapon. He stood still, and let it strike him. But he moved his body so that the blade met the stone which he held wrapped in his cloak. The sword broke in half, and before Nadcrantal could grasp another weapon, Cuchulainn had leaped at him, and struck off his head. Fergus went back with the body, and soon all Maive's army knew that the first of their champions had failed.

Others, however, had promised to succeed him. Cur, son of Dalath, was, in spite of Nadcrantal's defeat, as contemptuous as that warrior had been. It was said of Cur that no one ever recovered from his stroke, for,

even if he should escape instant death, the wound would be so severe that it would prove fatal within a week.

"Since you wish it," he had said to Maive, "I will go; though, if you had not asked me, I should not have sought battle with him of my own accord. If I had sent one of the young boys in my company, I should have thought it quite enough."

"You would have thought wrongly, then," said Cormac, King Conachar's exiled son. "It will be a wonder to us if you conquer him."

"Well, I do not think myself," replied Cur, "that I shall be long away from you to-morrow, killing that young deer."

At the meeting-place he found the "young deer" already waiting. Indeed, he had been there since dawn, and, to pass the time, was performing his many feats. He played in turn with his spears, his shield, and his sword. Besides these, he had a ball, which, amidst all his other tricks of sleight of hand, he never allowed to fall to the ground.

So absorbed was he that he let Cur come up close to him. Yet so swiftly did he ply his weapons that they were like a steel wall between him and his enemy. For a long time Cur tried to get within Cuchulainn's quickly moving guard, but without success. At last the Ulster champion grew tired of seeing the man dodge round him, looking for an unprotected place to thrust at. Without warning he stood still, snatched the ball in mid-air, and hurled it at Cur's head. It struck him on the forehead, and brought him down.

The next man whom Maive asked to meet Cuchulainn would fain have been excused, but not from fear. Long ago the two had sworn lifelong friendship, and,

like certain savages in Africa, had sealed it by the ceremony of "blood-brotherhood". They had solemnly cut themselves, and each had smeared some of his own blood upon the other's wound. He had refused at first to break this bond, but Maive, who knew how good a fighter he was, had prepared him a banquet, plied him with wine, and cajoled him with flatteries. To these enticements was added the promise of Finnevar, and, before morning had come, Ferbaeth found himself pledged to fight his sworn brother and old friend.

But by the next day he had bitterly repented, and Cuchulainn, when Lugaid went secretly to him to tell him, was hardly less grieved.

"O Lugaid," he said, "this is a bad business! Tell him it is not like a true warrior to fight his blood-brother. Ask him to come to-night, and talk it over with me."

Lugaid took the message, and Ferbaeth came. But, however much he might regret his promise to Maive, he saw no way of getting out of it.

"I have sworn," he told Cuchulainn sorrowfully, "and must keep my oath. So let us annul our bond, and make it as though it had never been made. To-morrow we will meet as strangers, and one of us must fall."

By what savage ceremony the two renounced their blood-brotherhood, the ancient story does not tell us. But we know that it was done, and that Ferbaeth went back that night, to take some sleep before the morrow's battle.

He rose with a heavy heart, and so did Cuchulainn. But, as they stood facing one another, a sudden inspiration came to the Ulster hero. Even against Ferbaeth's

will, he thought, the tie of blood-brotherhood might be renewed, making further fighting between them impossible. He thrust his spear into the calf of his own leg, so that his blood came out on to the blade, and then flung the reddened weapon at Ferbaeth, wounding him. Thus, so far as *he* was concerned, their mystic tie was made binding again, for he had mingled his blood with Ferbaeth's, and it would only be necessary for the other to do the same to complete the ceremony. But Ferbaeth could not reply, either in friendship or in enmity. Cuchulainn's weapon had hit harder and gone deeper than its owner had meant.

Ferbaeth fell, and his conqueror helped the wounded man's charioteer to place him among the cushions, and ordered him to drive with every care back to Maive's camp. The two parted as friends, but they never saw one another again. Next day Lugaid brought Cuchulainn the sad news that his blood-brother was dead.

The day after that, Lugaid came again, in haste and trouble.

"They are going to send my own brother, Larine, against you," he said. "Maive has persuaded him with the promise of Finnevar. He will come, for he is bewitched about the girl, and you will slay him, for he is no match for you, and I shall be left without a brother. I know why Maive has done this; it is so that, when he falls at your hands, I shall be bound in honour to avenge him. So, by our old friendship, do not do him any harm."

"I cannot run away from him," said Cuchulainn, "for the credit of Ulster. But if you wish, I will attack him without my weapons."

Larine came to meet Cuchulainn in all his panoply. In another chariot was Lúgaid, and in a third was Finnevar, who had come out to encourage her champion, and to see him win. But no sooner had Larine set foot on the ground than Cuchulainn, throwing away his shield, sword, and spear, sprang at him and grasped him. As a fox is shaken by a wolf-hound, so was Larine between the hands of Cuchulainn. He shook him until he had to pause for very weariness, and then flung him from him, so that he fell, all of a heap, in front of Finnevar's chariot. Thus Larine, son of Nois, gained one distinction, though it could hardly be called a proud one. He was, and he continued to be, the only man who fought with Cuchulainn in the Cattle Raid of Cooley, and came out of it alive.

One might have thought that, after this humiliating defeat of Larine's, no one else would wish to try conclusions with Cuchulainn in physical strength. Nevertheless, the incident brought out a fresh antagonist for him in a warrior named Mand. He is described¹ as "a man fierce and excessive in eating and sleeping, a man ill-tongued, foul-mouthed, like Dubthach, the Beetle of Ulster; . . . a man strong, active, with strength of limb like Muinremar Mac Geirgind."

This Mand offered to challenge Cuchulainn to meet him unarmed.

"There is not much honour to be got by plying man's weapons on a wild, beardless boy," he said. "So I will grind him between my two hands till I have made an end of him."

Off he went to do it, and Laeg, who was watching Maive's army, saw him approach.

¹ In *The Book of the Dun Cow*.

"An unarmed man is coming," he reported to Cuchulainn, "a man strong and dark as a bull."

"Let him pass you, and come to me," was the reply, "and I will find out what he wants."

Cuchulainn was not long in finding out.

"I have come to try my strength against yours," said Mand.

They fought, and Cuchulainn seemed to have met his match at last. Three times Mand flung him to the ground. Laeg thought it was time to goad his master again into fury with taunts.

"Shame on you!" he cried, "you who won the 'Champion's Portion' of Ulster, to be thrown like this!"

The jeer cast Cuchulainn into his Berserker fury. With one great effort he seized Mand in his arms, and dashed him against a standing stone with such violence that he was killed on the spot.

But while these duels were in progress, the crafty queen had not been idle. She had sent sixty men to make a circuit around Cuchulainn, and get behind him into Ulster. There was no one to oppose them, and in a valley of the Slieve Gullion they found the Brown Bull, with fifty heifers. They surrounded them, and, by striking their spear-shafts against their shields, drove them before them over the border. Thus Maive gained for the time, at least, the object of her foray. She secured the bull she coveted, in spite of the guardian of Ulster, who heard of the sudden incursion too late to stop it. "This", says the *Book of Leinster*, "was the greatest affront which in the course of the Raid was put upon Cuchulainn."

CHAPTER VI

HOW THE VERY GODS HINDERED AND HELPED

CUCHULAINN

ALL Ireland was by this time amazed at the youthful hero's prowess. The best of Maive's warriors shrank from the thought of meeting him, while the Ulster exiles openly gloried in his exploits. Perhaps his fame hardly reached the Red Branch Champions, lying dazed and heavy in their mysterious weakness. But, on the other hand, beings higher than men were alert, watching and marvelling at one whose deeds, though he was but a mortal, were as mighty as their own.

We have said that the fancy of the ancient Irish peopled the heaven and the earth with a family of gods not unlike those of the Greeks and Romans. Their Zeus, or Jupiter, was Nuada, whose "Silver Hand" was the light, and whose invincible sword was the lightning. His wife was called the Morrígú, that is the "Great Queen"; she was a Celtic Bellona, who loved strife and battles. Their Hermes, or Mercury, was Ogma, whose title of "Honey Mouthed" showed that he symbolized eloquence. The Sea was ruled by Lêr and his son Manannán, from whom the Isle of Man gets its name; while the Earth was subject to The Dagda, and is poetically described as his magic cauldron which fed all who came to it with whatever food they deserved. Their Sun-god was Lugh, whose title, the "Long Handed", recalls that of "Far Darter" given by

the Greek poets to Apollo. These, of course, are but a few, only some of the greatest of them. They were thought to dwell in a mysterious world beneath the ground and under the waters of the sea, from which they sometimes visited upper earth on their adventures and errands. It was while doing so that they beheld the marvellous feats of Cuchulainn.

The great goddess of battles felt that here at last was a hero worthy of her help and friendship. So (for the gods can take upon them any shape they choose) she appeared to him in the guise of a mortal woman, a tall and beautiful Amazon, fully armed, and driving a war-chariot. Cuchulainn wondered who was coming towards him, this splendid figure in crimson dress, drawn along lightly by a chestnut horse, better even than either of his own two famous steeds, the Black and the Gray. He waited till she came up to him, then asked her who she was, and what was her errand.

"I am a chief's daughter," she replied, "and, filled with admiration of your exploits, I have come to offer you my help."

But Cuchulainn would have held it beneath his dignity to accept a woman's help, even though she were a very Scathach, in guarding Ulster. In courteous but firm words he told her so. But the haughty goddess was not used to having her offers rejected.

"Think well before you speak again," she said. "I can give you good aid in your battles, and am still willing to do so. But if you refuse it, you shall have my hindrance and hatred instead. Till now you have met your enemies on equal terms, but slight me, and instead of helping *you*, I will help *them*, and that in ways

which will easily give them the advantage over you. So make your choice."

"I have made it," replied Cuchulainn, "and what you say does not frighten me at all."

"Beware!" she threatened. "When you are fighting in the ford against a man as good as yourself, I will take the shape of an eel, and entangle your feet, so that you will slip, and be at his mercy."

"I will put my foot upon that eel," replied Cuchulainn, "and crush it against the green, weedy stones, and bruise it so that you will not find it easy to heal yourself."

"Then I will take the shape of a wolf," continued the goddess, "and fix my fangs in your right arm. That will put you in your enemy's hands before you can free yourself. So take heed how you thwart me!"

"A worse wound will be yours," replied Cuchulainn. "For I will strike my spear into that wolf's eye."

"Then I will take the shape of a heifer and rush upon you," she went on. "I will overthrow you, and trample you under my hoofs, and it will not be hard for your enemy to finish what I have begun."

"It is your own leg that will be broken as the result of it," replied Cuchulainn.

There was no answer to this but a mocking croak. Woman and horse and chariot had vanished, and a black, gray-headed carrion-crow sat upon a stone, peering at him with shifty eyes. The war-goddess was already giving him proof of her magic powers. He flung a stone at the bird, which flew away croaking.

Cuchulainn's next duel was, however, an easy one.

Maive had summoned to her a famous warrior called Loch. He was said to have an impenetrable skin of horn, which probably refers to some very close-fitting kind of armour, made, no doubt, of hide. This was the man whom she now wished to go and fight with Cuchulainn.

But Loch hung back.

"I do not want to fight with a boy who has no beard," was the reason he gave. "Whatever happens, there is no honour or credit in it. If I fall at his hands, men will laugh at me after I am dead; and if I slay him, it will add nothing to my fame. But I have a younger brother who is about his match. Send *him* instead of *me*."

So Maive sent for Loch's brother, whose name was Long, and offered him twelve suits of armour and a chariot worth seven slaves, as well as Finnevar for his wife, and a welcome at Cruachan whenever he cared to stay there. Long was tempted by this, but Cuchulainn made short work of him. This roused Loch's furious anger (which was perhaps what Maive had hoped for), and he swore that, if Cuchulainn had but a beard, he would not rest until he had avenged his brother.

The Ulster exiles soon found means of letting Cuchulainn know this. The hero consulted with Laeg.

"They will not fight me, Laeg, until I have grown a beard," he said, laughing. "How can I grow one quickest?"

"The best way is this," replied the chariot-driver. "Let me smear your chin with blackberry juice, and, when it dries, it will leave the appearance of a fine black beard on you. Then show yourself, at a dis-

tance, to the men of Ireland, and I warrant that Loch will not look at your beard too closely before he comes to challenge you."

Great was the surprise of those who were not in the secret when Cuchulainn was seen in his black beard, flashing his spears before the host, and calling for a man to fight with him.

"Is that really a beard I see on Cuchulainn?" said Loch to Maive.

"It has all the appearance of it," replied the queen. So Loch went away to don his impenetrable "horn-skin".

On the other hand, Cuchulainn made careful preparations, for he felt that this would be no ordinary fight. He brought out a weapon he had not yet used, the barbed harpoon called the "Bellows-dart", which Scathach had given him as a parting gift. Let all other weapons turn blunt against Loch's hide of horn, this one, at any rate, would not fail! He did not, however, mean to use it except as a last resource, so it was given to Laeg to hold.

They fought for a long time without result. Cuchulainn's sword rattled harmlessly upon Loch's armour, though Loch himself could not get his weapon past Cuchulainn's guard. Up and down the ford they trampled, until, with alternate cut and thrust and parry, they met in the middle of the shallow stream. Then, suddenly, Cuchulainn felt something heavy and slippery knot itself around his ankles; he slipped, struggled, and fell, splashing. In a moment Loch was upon him, and the red blood began to flow. But neither Loch nor the eel could keep Cuchulainn down, and he got up, the slimy creature still around his feet.

With a great effort he shook himself free of it, trampling it against the round stones until it was only too glad to creep away alive.

Again the duel began, and presently Cuchulainn felt something pierce his arm. A wolf had come behind him, the second attack which the fierce war-goddess had promised. For a moment he was at a disadvantage, and Loch profited by it to get in a second blow. But Cuchulainn thrust at the wolf's face, and the beast let go its grip, and slunk off, blinded and howling.

Cuchulainn was now weakened by two bad wounds. But worse was to follow. A white, red-eared heifer came charging down the stream, and before Cuchulainn could leap aside, it had overthrown him, and was trampling out his life. Yet he managed to reach a heavy stone, and struck one of the beast's legs with it, so that the disguised war-goddess limped away crippled. But, as he rose, Loch wounded him again.

It was now high time for Cuchulainn's last chance, the Bellows-dart. This weapon he seldom handled, lest his enemies should learn its secret. It could only be used in running water, and then only by being thrown from between the toes; but, when it struck, there was no hope for the smitten man, for it could not be drawn out, because of its barbs. He signed to Laeg to put the weapon into the stream above him.

It floated swiftly down, and, as it came past, Cuchulainn caught it with one foot, and made it leap upwards. For all Loch's "horn skin" it went deep into him, and he staggered helplessly in mid-stream.

"For your honour's sake, Cuchulainn, grant me one last boon," he gasped.

"What is it?"

"It is not my life I crave," replied the proud warrior, "for I know that I have got my death. But I wish you to put me so that I shall fall forward towards Ulster, and no one can say that it was not facing you I came to my end."

"You ask a right hero's boon," answered Cuchulainn; and he helped his vanquished foeman to fall as he had wished, his back towards Maive's host, his face towards her enemy. And so Loch died.

But now a great weariness came upon Cuchulainn. The wounds that Loch had dealt him were deep and painful, and gloom began to gather round him. Not for much longer could he fend off the invading host; the hardships of daily battle were too much for him, and now, after his hard-won victory over both man and goddess, he would come with weakened body and stiffened limbs to future combats! In his despair, he urged Laeg to hasten back to Emain, and tell those there that he could no longer protect them, for he was worn out, and full of wounds and pains.

But if one of the Irish divinities had been his foe, there was another who was ready to be his friend. Laeg had not yet started for Emain, when he saw a man coming towards them across the plain. The stranger was tall and comely, with waving golden hair; his tunic was bordered with gold, and over it was flung a green mantle, fastened with a silver brooch. He carried a black shield, rimmed with white bronze, a five-barbed spear, and a forked javelin. He was not a man of Ulster, nor was he from Maive's host; and Cuchulainn guessed that he was of more than mortal birth, one of the gods who dwelt beneath the fairy hills.

They greeted one another, but the tall, radiant man

would not say who he was. All he would tell them was that he had come to aid Cuchulainn, by casting him into a deep, quiet slumber, while he healed all his wounds. The weary hero was only too glad of this help. Soon he was resting in a charmed sleep, while the herbs of fairyland were curing all his hurts. Thus he remained for three days, gaining fresh strength and spirit. And during those three days Maive's champions found a man at the ford whom none doubted was Cuchulainn. Each day he quickly killed his antagonist, and came back to watch over the real Cuchulainn in his sleep.

When he saw that he was perfectly healed, he went away as quietly as he had come. He did not tell his name, but it is said in legend that he was none other than the Apollo of the Gaels, Lugh Lamhfada¹, "Light with the Long Hand".

¹ Pronounce *Luga Lavāda*.

CHAPTER VII

HOW CUCHULAINN AVENGED HIS BOY COMPANIONS

WHEN Cuchulainn woke up, he found himself completely cured. There was no trace of a wound upon him anywhere; all the fatigue caused by exhausting combats and loss of sleep had left him, and he felt as fresh in mind and body as on the very first day of the Raid. Laeg had been to Emain Macha, and had returned. Cuchulainn asked him how long he had slept.

"Three days and three nights," was the reply.

"Alas! alas!" he cried. "My honour is gone! There has been no one at the ford to meet Maive's champions! Tell me, have they passed the frontier? Are they now ravaging Ulster?"

"By no means," replied Laeg. "Every day Maive has sent her champion, and every day a warrior has met him at the ford. Neither has anyone known that it was not you yourself, for it was in your likeness that he fought. Every man that came against him he killed, so that you have certainly lost no honour through him. And I think that he was no man at all, but Lugh of the Long Hand from the Hills of the *Sídhe*."

"And you, Laeg, what have you done?"

"I have been to Emain, and tried to hasten the Champions of the Red Branch. But Conachar and all his men still lie in their weary sickness; I can get no help from any of them yet. None the less, help has come out of Ulster," he added.

"From whom?" asked Cuchulainn.

"From your old companions, the boy-corps of Emain," replied Laeg, "with Follaman, Conachar's own son, to lead them. When they heard that you were defending Ulster alone, they came to your help, and no one dared to stop them, or say them nay. Follaman boasted that he would take the gold crown from King Ailell's head, and wear it in triumph back to Emain. But he failed to do this."

Something in Laeg's grave manner struck Cuchulainn.

"There is more to be told yet," he said. "Keep back nothing. Did they fight well? Were many of them slain?"

"I will keep back nothing, Cuchulainn. All were slain. They were but boys against men. But before they died they had killed their own number—a man for every boy. As for Follaman, he fell at the hands of the two foster-sons of Ailell. None went back to Emain."

"Woe is me that I was not in my strength!" cried Cuchulainn. "Then the boy-corps would not have fallen, and Conachar's youngest son would not have perished."

And he wept, and hid his face in his hands.

But in a little while he rose up, his face set stern and hard.

"Have you my scythed chariot ready, with all its equipment?" he said.

"I have," replied Laeg.

"Then yoke the Black of Sainglen and the Gray of Macha to it, and you and I will avenge the deaths of the boy-corps upon Maive's army."

Laeg was nothing loth. He donned his chariot-

driver's dress, his soft, well-tanned, light, and airy tunic of deer-skin, and flung his black cloak over it. Round his head he bound the golden fillet, the badge of charioteers. Next he placed the iron breastplates and spiked harness upon the two horses, so that they were covered all over with bristling points, as sharp as knives. He yoked them to the especial war-chariot, which was "equipped with iron points, with sharp edges, with hooks, with hard spit-spikes, with machinery for opening it, with sharp nails that studded over its axles and straps and curved parts and tackle".¹ He made ready the reins, the whip, and the goad.

Then Cuchulainn armed himself, and perhaps a description of his armour, quoted from a literal translation of the most ancient manuscript in which these stories are preserved, the *Book of the Dun Cow*, may be thought interesting, as helping to give some idea of the original sagas.

"Then," it says, "the hero and the champion and he who made the fold of the Badb of the men of the earth,"² Cuchulainn mac Sualtaim, took his battle-array of battle and contest and strife. This was his battle-array of battle and contest and strife: he put on twenty-seven skin tunics, waxed, like board, equally thick, which used to be under strings and chains and thongs, against his white skin, that he might not lose his mind nor his understanding, when his rage should come. He put on his hero's battle-girdle over it outside, of hard-leather, hard, tanned, of the choice of seven ox-hides of a heifer, so

¹ *Book of Leinster*.

² That is to say, "who piled up the slain in battle". The Badb was a war-goddess. It is an example of the bardic language.

that it covered him from the thin part of his sides to the thick part of his arm-pit; it used to be on him to repel spears, and points, and darts, and lances, and arrows. For they were cast from him just as if it was stone or rock or horn that they struck. Then he put on his apron, skin-like, silken, with its edge of white gold variegated, against the soft lower part of his body. He put on his dark apron of dark leather, well tanned, of the choice of four ox-hides of a heifer, with his battle-girdle of cow's skins about it over his silken skin-like apron. Then the royal hero took his battle-arms of battle and contest and strife. These then were his battle-arms of battle: he took his ivory-hilted, bright-faced weapon, with his eight little swords; he took his five-pointed spear, with his eight little spears; he took his spear of battle, with his eight little darts; he took his javelin with his eight little javelins; his eight shields of feats, with his round shield, dark red, in which a boar that would be shown at a feast would go into the boss, with its edge sharp, keen, very sharp, round about it, so that it would cut hairs against the stream for sharpness and keenness and great sharpness; when the warrior did the edge-feat with it, he would cut equally well with his shield, and with his spear, and with his sword.

“Then he put on his head a ridged helmet of battle and contest and strife, from which there was uttered the shout of a hundred warriors, with a long cry from every corner and every angle of it. For there used to cry from it equally goblins and sprites and ghosts of the glen and demons of the air, before and above and around, wherever he used to go before shedding the blood of warriors and enemies. There was cast over

him his dress of concealment by the garment of the Land of Promise that was given by his foster-father in wizardry.”¹

Thus equipped, Laeg and Cuchulainn went forth to avenge our hero's old playmates. They never paused as they came thundering down upon Maive's host. When they saw him charge into their camp, the men of Erin flocked out on every side to attack and repel him. Such a chance of annihilating a single man by force of numbers had surely never been before!

But it was all useless. The horses and chariot, one moving mass of tearing scythes and spears, cut through them, as a walking man goes through water or long grass. Laeg steered it this way and that, as though it had been a weapon in his hands, so that all who were nearest it were gashed and wounded. Cast as they might, their weapons fell harmless from the rimmed shield and the ox-hide armour. He passed right through them, and then turned back. Now he made a circuit round the host, herding it up, as a shepherd drives his sheep; then he dashed headlong into the struggling mass of men. It would be horrible to tell in detail of this slaughter, which the old books call a *brisleach*, a word which a Gaelic scholar¹ forcibly translates as “smash-up”. And out of this “smash-up” of Maive's host Cuchulainn and Laeg and even the horses emerged without a scratch, so well were they armoured, and so great was the terror that they caused.

¹ Translated by Miss W. L. Faraday.

² Mr. Standish Hayes O'Grady.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW CUCHULAINN AND HIS FOSTER-FATHER FOUGHT A MOCK FIGHT

THE next morning, no champion from Maive's host came to fight Cuchulainn. The disorder left by his attack and the fear inspired by it were too recent. Maive, indeed, asked several of her warriors to take up the standing challenge. But the answer of each of them was the same. "I do not see why *my* family should be called upon to furnish a victim."

The baffled queen could persuade no one. So, to hide this from Cuchulainn, while she allowed the dismay of her men to die down, she sent Fergus to the hero with a message of truce. Would he come down in peaceful guise to parley with her? She thought that when her warriors saw him, all a boy as he was, without his armour, and without his terrible chariot, gentle, instead of in the battle-fury of the day before, they would pluck up heart and be no longer so afraid of him. Nor had she yet quite given up her hope of buying his friendship. She swore to use no treachery towards him, and gave sureties to Fergus for it. So Cuchulainn came.

Very different was his appearance now to his aspect of the day before. Not his impenetrable suit of ox-hide did he wear, but a feast-dress of white satin fringed with gold, a kilt of red silk, and a purple cloak fastened across the breast with a silver brooch which shone luminous as a torch. A gold necklace was round his neck, and

carbuncles strung on twine of gold were threaded through his carefully-dressed hair. He brought with him his most beautiful arms, those whose shafts and hilts were of gold and ivory. These he shook in the air, not in anger, but to show off his dazzling feats.

But, in spite of their compact of truce, the crafty queen, too treacherous herself not to look for treachery in others, was afraid of him. What, she thought, if he were suddenly to shoot a sling-stone at me? So she ordered some of her men to make round her what the old books call an "ox-vat" of shields, a protection something like the Latin "testudo", made by linking bucklers together to form a wall. From this shelter she peered out suspiciously at Cuchulainn.

But the other women, wives of her warriors, who had done nothing to anger the Ulster hero, were by no means afraid of him. Though they also asked the men round them for the help of their shields, it was not in order to protect their faces, but, on the contrary, so that they might the better see and be seen. The men held their flat bucklers so as to make temporary platforms, on to which the women could step, and thence clamber without too much effort on to their husbands' and brothers' shoulders. There they clung, and wondered at Cuchulainn, yesterday so terrible, but to-day so fair and gentle. To women and men alike the solitary warden of Ulster was the centre of admiration.

Except to one man, Dubthach, the surly, cross-grained "Beetle of Ulster". He had always been envious of Cuchulainn in the old days at Emain, and, now that his rival had gained such glory as an enemy, this envy had become a black hatred. Blinded by his hate, he slipped among the crowds of staring men until he found the tall

form of Fergus, and whispered into that hero's ear what a chance had come of putting an end to the foe whom all secretly feared. Here he stood among them, not indeed unarmed, but without his ox-hide armour, his scythed and point-bristling chariot! Why should not the word be passed round to suddenly draw swords and close in upon him? But the treacherous "Beetle" had come to the wrong man with his shameful scheme. Even had Fergus been less an admirer of his foster-son, he would not have tolerated such an act of dishonour. We are told that he turned upon Dubthach, and sent him flying from him with such a mighty kick that the traitor rolled upon the ground, a laughing-stock to the whole host.

So Cúchulainn went away as safely as he had come, though without having had any audience of the suspicious queen. She had, however, gained her own end, which had been to let the day pass without having to send a combatant to the ford. Still, the matter could not be put off. Not only would none of the younger, less practised warriors now dare it, but the famous heroes of Ireland were hardly more eager to offer themselves.

She was thrown back, therefore, upon one whom, as yet, she had not cared, or dared, to ask. The greatest of the Ulster exiles had ostentatiously refrained from taking any personal part in the war. He had always been ready enough with his comments and his stories, even with his advice, but he had never offered to fight. On the contrary, he had been the one to carry on negotiations between Cúchulainn and Maive, almost as freely as though he belonged to some quite neutral party, instead of being on Connaught's side. More

than this, she suspected him of having at least a lingering sentiment in favour of his native Ulster. She had never been deceived over that business of his first day's guiding of the army. She knew that he had purposely led it astray, while Cuchulainn was being warned. Yet, in her perplexity, she had to turn to him now for the help which no one else could give. She asked him to go and fight Cuchulainn, but Fergus gravely declined.

"I am step-father to King Conachar. Surely you do not ask me to go out against a beardless boy?"

"Many have called him that," replied Maive, "and have repented it. Bearded or not bearded, he is no unfit foeman for you."

"When we were in Ulster," said Fergus, "I was his foster-father, and he was the same to me as a son. Such bonds as those cannot be broken."

"Is Ulster so dear to you, then?" retorted the queen; "and are we, who sheltered you when Ulster cast you out, so hateful?"

And by entreaties and taunts and tender or sharp words, and every womanly wile, she prevailed upon him, so that against his will he found himself pledged to go the next morning to the ford.

Cuchulainn, who was watching, was surprised to see him, and all the more puzzled when he noticed that though Fergus was armed with lance and shield, only the scabbard of his terrible two-handed sword, "Hard Bulging", hung at his side.

"Welcome, my foster-father!" he said. "Why have you come to visit me so early? I expected to meet Maive's champion, and I find you here instead."

"That is because it is I who am Maive's champion for

to-day," replied Fergus. "I have promised to fight you, Cuchulainn."

"And yet you have come without your sword!" exclaimed the Ulster hero in still greater wonder. "My foster-father, was that a wise thing for you to do?"

"Surely you cannot suppose, my son," replied Fergus, "that, if I had it here, I would draw it upon *you*? Come, let us sit down and talk."

They went a little way apart, and sat down side by side.

"I have pledged my word to Maive," said Fergus, "and cannot break it. But do you think it would be any shame to you to run away from the man who taught you skill in arms when you were only a boy?"

Cuchulainn shook his head.

"It is not for me to run away from anyone," he replied, "and I should be very loth to do it."

"Not even from *me*, Cuchulainn? Think of all I did for you in the old days at Emain. It is for the sake of those old days I ask you."

"It would be as great a disgrace for me to run away from you, Fergus, as for you to run away from me," replied Cuchulainn.

Fergus laughed.

"Then let us make a bargain," he said. "Run away from *me* now, and let Maive's army see it, and I will run away from *you* on any other day that you shall choose. Some time when I am pressing Ulster hard, you will only have to call to me, and I will keep my promise, and turn before you, and flee."

So Cuchulainn agreed to this, for it was easy for him to see how greatly such a hold upon Fergus might be

used afterwards to the profit of Ulster. The two charged together in their chariots, and, after a few mock passes, Cuchulainn called to Laeg to turn the chariot towards the lines of Connaught. The army was watching for Fergus's return, when suddenly the two champions came in sight, Cuchulainn ahead, his horses at their topmost speed, with Fergus close behind, shouting in triumph. Once Cuchulainn turned and made a stand, but Fergus seemed to beat him down, and again he fled. Only by wondrous luck did it seem to those who watched that he could escape. But, having once cleared himself, he gained ground and kept it, and was well in front of Fergus when pursuer and pursued passed out of sight.

After an anxious time of waiting, Fergus was seen coming back, and they crowded out to meet him.

"Have you killed Cuchulainn?" cried Maivé.

"I have not," replied Fergus, "he was too quick for me. But you saw how I made him run for it."

"Go again to-morrow," said the queen. "Perhaps you will have better fortune then."

But Fergus only laughed.

"Not I," he replied. "I have done enough, for it is more than anyone else has done yet. Let some of the others try their luck, and by the time that all your chief men have had their turns, perhaps it will have come round to *me* again."

CHAPTER IX

HOW CUCHULAINN WAS ASSAILED BY TWENTY-NINE AT A TIME

BUT it was growing late to talk about taking turns in fighting with Cuchulainn. Indeed, unless he could be put down soon, he would have fulfilled his object in guarding the ford, which was to hinder Maive's army while the men of Ulster slowly recovered from their weakness. This could not be long delayed now. In a few days at most they would be gathering their hosts to go and meet the men of Ireland.

Indeed, one by one they were rallying already. Some, it seemed, could shake off the deadly stupor that enveloped all of them a little earlier than their fellows. The first to do so was Cethern, son of Fintan, who, although he has played no previous part in our story, was none the less one of Conachar's twelve chief champions. Aroused at last, he came down in frantic haste to help Cuchulainn — so hurriedly, indeed, that he brought no weapon except an iron spit which had been the first thing on which he could lay his hand. With this he attacked like a madman every one he met in Maive's camp, but his rude weapon was no match for their better ones. He inflicted a few wounds, but he killed no one, and before long he was glad to escape with his own life to Cuchulainn's tent, where Fingan, Conachar's head physician, who had been sent down from Emain, treated his hurts by placing him in a bath of cow's marrow.

While he lay slowly healing in his gruesome tub, others were in the field to avenge him. His own father, Fintan, son of Niall of the Brilliant Deeds, brought thirty warriors, and these, better armed than Cethern, made just such another desperate attack upon Maive's army as the boy-corps of Emain had done. Nor did they escape much more lightly. Out of the courageous little band, only Fintan and one of his sons returned, but the surprise of their attack so shook Maive's demoralized host that it fell back a day's march before it could be rallied.

Naturally, this event did not make the warriors of Connaught any the more eager to challenge Cuchulainn. Maive, in despair, began to look for help outside her army. She sent an urgent message to Curoi, king of Munster, imploring him to come and fight for them. But Curoi well remembered Cuchulainn, whom he had proclaimed Head Champion of Ulster, and had no wish to come to blows with him. He returned a curt answer that enough Munster people had already gone to the war, and that he himself was not coming.

However, he *did* go, when he heard that Muinremar, son of Geirgind, Ulster's great stone-throwing champion, was coming down to batter the host with those rude but effective weapons. Curoi considered *himself* to be a doughty stone-thrower, so he decided to try conclusions with the brawny Ulsterman. Muinremar arrived first, and it is described how he "put his left elbow under him" to cast, a style which was evidently very effective, for, after three successive days' bombard-
ing, Maive's army broke and began to scatter. Then Curoi arrived, and, posting himself between the army and its assailant, began to answer Muinremar's fire.

But, however good his intentions were, the men of Erin soon found that they would have been better off without Curoi's help than with it, for the huge flag-stones hurled from one side to the other met in mid-air and broke into splinters which flew in all directions. So many were injured by them that messengers were sent to both the combatants asking them to stop stone-throwing and settle their duel in some way less dangerous to bystanders. And as, whomever else the two champions may have hurt with their stones, they had not yet succeeded in hitting one another, they could with a clear conscience call the fight a drawn one. This they agreed to do, and, to the relief of everyone, went home, Muinremar to Ulster, Curoi to Munster.

Ulster, however, was sending out another combatant, a veteran this time, no less than the grandfather of Cuchulainn's friend and former rival, Laegaire the Battle-Winner. He was old now and past his fighting days, and life did not seem to him to have much more left to offer. Like the Norse Vikings, he wished to fall in battle rather than to die what those heroes of saga called the "cow's death" in his bed, and this seemed to him a good chance of ending his days in one last burst of martial glory. He ordered his two withered and wasted old war-horses to be brought in from grass and harnessed to his ancient chariot, which was rickety and battered and without either cushions or skins. But the stern old warrior thought it good enough to die in, so he girded on his ancestral sword, took his iron shield and his two shaky-headed spears, and started. Though his people tried to dissuade him from this mad venture, he would not listen to them. "Whether I come out of it or not," he said, "is all one to me."

The men of Ireland laughed as they saw him come down, armourless, driving his aged horses and shaking his antiquated spears. When he demanded a champion to fight with him, they answered him with jests. His arrival was reported to Queen Maive, who came out to look at him. "I wish," she said, "that every man in Ulster would come to war like that."

A warrior drove out from the host to meet him, but not to fight.

"You will not know who I am," he said, greeting Iliach, "though your own name is familiar to *me*."

"Who are you, then?" asked Iliach.

"Dôche, son of Magach," was the reply, "in time of peace the bosom friend of your son's son Laegaire the Battle-Winner."

"I am glad to meet you, then," returned Iliach, "and I would ask you to do me a kindness for Laegaire's sake."

"If I can, I will," replied Dôche.

"It is not hard," said Iliach. "Watch me while I ply my hand on the men of Erin, and do not hinder me until my strength fails, but, when I give the sign, come up to me, and cut off my head. Then take my silver sword as spoil of battle, and keep it for your friend and my grandson, Laegaire."

And Dôche promised to do this.

Then Iliach drove furiously into Maive's army, and those who had mocked at him before had none the less to fight him now. Nor was the task a light one, for he was strong and wiry, and had all the fierce recklessness of one who neither expects nor intends to survive a battle. He fought until his rusty spears were both shattered; then, disdaining to draw the sword

he had bequeathed to his grandson, he began to hurl large flag-stones with which he had filled the bottom of his chariot. Many had their heads and limbs broken, others gave way before him, but at last his own strength was spent. He gave the sign to Dôche, who quickly despatched him, and took his sword. The other fighters shared his other spoils, and thus ended what the old books, with their picturesque choice of words, call "Iliach's lump-fight."

While these things were happening, Cuchulainn had remained perforce idle at the ford. No champion had been sent to fight with him, for none would go. There was no man in Ireland who did not feel that his death would be certain at Cuchulainn's hands. No man, that is to say, but one; and *he* would not come, for he had been Cuchulainn's old friend and fellow-pupil in Scathach's island. He was called Ferdiad, and belonged to the Ivernian tribe of the Men of Domnu.

Maive, however, in spite of his refusal, was still plotting to cajole or compel him to change his mind. But in the meantime something else must be done, for the army was staying idle, and every day brought the recovery of the Ulster warriors nearer. The crafty queen conceived a most ingeniously treacherous scheme for eluding her compact with Cuchulainn that only one man at a time should be sent to fight with him. She had with her a family of wizards, Calatin, with his twenty-seven sons and a grandson. We are told that "every man of them was endowed with poisonous quality, every individual weapon of their armament also being envenomed; not one of them ever hurled spear or slung stone that missed; and none whose blood was drawn by any one of them, but either in-

continently or before nine days were out he was merely a dead man.”¹ Perhaps this means that they belonged to some Ivernian tribe which had the secret of poisoning its weapons, a practice unknown to the Celts. All these wizards Maive now decided to send at once against Cuchulainn, her excuse for so doing being worthy of her. “Our oath will not be broken,” she argued, “for they are really only one man, because they are all descended from Calatin’s body.” That a man and his sons are the same person is truly a queer doctrine, but Maive insisted that it *was* so, and the men of her council did not dare to contradict the haughty queen.

But, whatever the men of Ireland thought and did not say, there was consternation among the Ulster exiles when they heard of it. Fergus called them together.

“It is not a fair fight,” they clamoured.

“It is not,” replied Fergus, “and Cuchulainn will be killed.”

“He shall not be,” was the cry; “we will prevent it.”

But Fergus gave them no encouragement. “We are bound in honour to keep still and do nothing,” he said, “for we have pledged ourselves to Connaught. But I would give my best arms to the man who would go and watch the fight, and come back to tell me how my foster-son behaved, and how he fell.”

“I will go, Fergus,” said the same Fiacha mac Firaba whom the Ulster exiles had sent out once before, to reproach Cuchulainn for what they had thought was his cowardice in avoiding Naderantal.

Early the next morning, Calatin and his sons went to the ford where Cuchulainn sat, every day,

¹ From *The Book of Leinster*.

waiting for the champions who lately had not come. Fiacha followed them cautiously, at a little distance behind. The fight was not long in commencing. Directly the twenty-nine wizards spied Cuchulainn they each let fly a poisoned dart at him, and not one missed its mark. But, on the other hand, not one hit it, for Cuchulainn managed to catch every dart upon his shield, so that the round target bristled with them, like a hedgehog with its spines. So cumbrous did they make it that he was obliged at any risk to remove them, which he did by shearing them off above the blade with his heavy sword. But this task, quickly as it was done, gave his enemies a second opportunity. While Cuchulainn's hand and eye were busy, they closed round him, and, springing on him all at once, weighed on him so heavily that he went to the ground, the vile crew upon the top of him, pressing out his life. He had no chance of using his sword, for he was so closely held that he could not move hand or foot, and, nearly smothered as he was, he felt that he was perishing. But instinctively he gave his "Champion's Whoop", a shout for help in battle, and the cry so stirred Fiacha that, though he was on the side of Connaught, he could not refrain from going to Cuchulainn's aid. Drawing his sword, he hacked at the sons of Calatin until, to save themselves, they were forced to let their victim rise. Half-choked and half-blinded he struggled to his feet, too angry at his discomfiture to do more than notice that someone had helped him indeed, but too late to save him from humiliation.

"I cannot help thinking," he observed to his rescuer, with some sarcasm, "that you must have come to my assistance in a very deliberate way."

If Fiacha had been a Frenchman, he might have shrugged his shoulders with great expression. "Deliberate or not," he replied, "it was treachery towards Connaught. There are three thousand of us in the camp, all Ulstermen of the clan of Rury, and, if it becomes known that I have done this for you, there will be nothing deliberate in the way in which we shall be treated. Every one of us will be passed at the edge of the sword for it."

Cuchulainn understood, and regretted his impetuous speech. But there was no time to say more, while Calatin and his sons could still do mischief.

"You may be certain that *I* shall not tell," he said, "and, if you will help me, none of these need, either."

So Cuchulainn and Fiacha together attacked the sons of Calatin. Only one—and he mortally wounded—escaped to the Connaught camp. He was just able to cry out "Fiacha" before he fell dead, almost at the feet of Maive and Fergus.

Now the word *fiacha*, in old Irish, besides being a proper name, meant "debts". So that Maive had no clue as to what had been happening, or rather she had a wrong one.

"His last word was about some debts," she said to Fergus. "Do you think he owes debts, or does someone in the camp owe them to *him*?"

"I cannot tell," answered the crafty Fergus, who perhaps guessed more than he cared to say, "but, at any rate, his debts are all settled now."

CHAPTER X

HOW CUCHULAINN FOUGHT WITH HIS OLD FRIEND

THIS attack upon Cuchulainn by twenty-nine at once was, of course, a breaking of the compact which Maive had made with him. Its terms had been, it will be remembered, that in consideration of only one champion a day being sent, Cuchulainn should stay quiet at the ford, and not harass the main army with darts and sling-stones. But now he held that Maive's act of treachery had absolved him from keeping his own share of the bargain. Again the stealthy midnight attacks began, until Maive's host was in a panic. No man could move or show himself without drawing a deadly shot.

So that Maive, knowing that none of her own warriors would go against Cuchulainn now, redoubled her efforts to persuade the famous Ivernian hero, Ferdiad¹. If *he* could not cope with Cuchulainn, no man could; for they had both had the same teachers in war-craft. Ferdiad had been in Scathach's island at the same time as Cuchulainn, and a firm friendship had grown up between them. The Ulster hero had been Ferdiad's junior, and therefore, according to the rules of chivalry at that time, he had waited upon him, had been, if you like, his squire or page, or, if you prefer to put it in a more familiar way, his "fag". He used to make his senior's bed, and take care of his weapons. But, except for this courtesy of younger to older, there had been little to

¹ Pronounce *Fardia*.

choose between them. They practised the same feats, and went upon the same adventures. And though now Cuchulainn was perhaps his friend's superior, it was in one thing alone: the feat of using the *gae bulga*, that mysterious water-harpoon which Scathach had given him, and whose proper use she had taught him as an especial favour. Here surely was the man to send against Cuchulainn! But he refused all Maive's offers and promises, dismissing every messenger with the same answer.

"There is one thing I will not do, and that is, fight with my old friend and fellow-pupil."

But Maive would not be denied. If he were too honourable to be bribed and too brave to be frightened, there was still a way of overcoming his scruples. His very feeling of honour could be used against him by one unscrupulous enough. There was one thing the men of ancient Ireland were more afraid of than of loss of life or limb, and that was ridicule. A sharp-witted poet, by making a lampoon upon his enemy, showing up his weak points to the cruel laughter of other men, could kill him. It was believed that the effects of the satire itself, even if its victim laughed at it, would prove fatal within nine days. As a matter of fact, the warrior thus held up to contempt either committed suicide, or even actually died of shame. Emotion and imagination are very strong in certain half-civilized races, and there are instances of such things having happened among modern savages. At any rate, there existed in ancient Ireland professional satirists open to hire, bravos who murdered with their tongues, and not with their daggers. It was by means of such men as these that Maive determined to bend Ferdiad's will. With the next relay of messengers, she

sent "druids and satirists and violent excitors", with the threat that, if he refused to come, they were to begin their work. Ferdiad yielded. He dared not face the worst fate possible to a high-spirited warrior—to die not gloriously but shamefully, and to be remembered not with admiration but with contempt.

He returned with the messengers, and Maive received him with great respect. A large tent was set apart for him, and a feast prepared in it. At the banquet, Finnevar, Maive's lovely daughter, sat by him, gave him apples and wine with her own hands, and told him that he was the one man in all Ireland she loved. Then, when she saw that his heart was kindled by the wine and by Finnevar's beauty, Maive described to him the rewards and honours he would get, if he proved victorious over Cuchulainn—a chariot worth many slaves, equipments for twelve men, an estate in the fertile plain of Ai, to be held by him and his descendants for ever without tax or tribute, a perpetual welcome in Cruachan whenever he chose to stay there, a splendid golden brooch which was Maive's most cherished ornament, and, above all this, her daughter Finnevar for his bride. The guests at the banquet expressed their wonder at the greatness of these gifts. But Ferdiad would not be tempted.

"Great as they are," he said, "they will remain your own, O Queen, rather than that I should go against my old friend."

"Ah!" replied Maive, "then what Cuchulainn said was true!

"What was that?" asked Ferdiad.

"That you would never dare to come against him, and that, if you did, it would not be much trouble to him to put you down."

Maive lied; but the now incautious Ferdiad did not think of that. If it was in such a way as this that his once dear companion talked of him now, he would show him he was wrong! Cuchulainn must indeed be swelled out with his exploits to so sneer at him! That he had never done so did not occur to the excited Connaught warrior.

"He might have spared saying that!" he exclaimed. "So now I swear by the gods of my people that to-morrow morning I will meet him at the ford."

After this, there could be no drawing back. He had bound himself with the tribal oath. But he knew enough of Queen Maive to want to be quite certain that, after he had fought and conquered, she would not deny her promises. He made her swear by Sun and Moon, Earth and Sea, to be faithful to them. Even then he would not trust her. Besides her oath, he exacted six sureties, all chief men of Connaught, including two of her own sons, to hold themselves personally liable if she broke her word. Thus the affair was clinched, and Ferdiad found himself pledged to fight with Cuchulainn.

That night Maive discussed the matter with her husband, quite in her open, candid way.

"We have secured Ferdiad at last," she said. "And yet I doubt very much whether he will come back to us to-morrow upon his own feet."

And Ailell was even more cynical.

"It does not matter much," he replied, "so long as he finishes Cuchulainn. If he does that, they can both kill one another, for all I care."

Fergus, on the other hand, was far less certain than the queen that Cuchulainn would conquer Ferdiad. He decided to warn his foster-son, and commanded his

chariot to be put in order. Laeg saw him coming, and Cuchulainn went out to welcome him. He was much troubled when he heard the news.

"I wish it were any other man in the world," he said. "And I say this, not because of any fear I have of him, but because of my love for him."

"None the less," replied Fergus, "he is a man to be feared."

The high-spirited Cuchulainn flared up just as Ferdiad had done.

"By the oath of my people!" he swore, "if he dares to show himself at the ford, I will make him bend under my sword like the most pliant reed in the stream."

"Be cautious with him," said Fergus, "for Ferdiad is very different from the other champions you have met."

"From the beginning of the winter until now, I have been fighting the men of Ireland, and I have not yet yielded a foot before any one of them, nor am I likely to do so before Ferdiad," replied Cuchulainn.

So, with mutual greetings, Fergus and Cuchulainn parted, the one to return to Maive's encampment, the other to take a long rest in anticipation of the coming duel.

Cuchulainn slept well, and did not rise until the day had fully come, for he did not wish it to be said that anxiety at the thought of fighting Ferdiad had driven him out of his bed early. But Ferdiad, after the heaviness induced by the banquet had passed away, woke up restless and anxious. He rose while it was still dark, and, in spite of his driver's complaints, ordered his chariot to be prepared. He reached the ford as day dawned, but his enemy was not there.

"Spread my rugs and cushions here for me," he said,

"so that I may get a little more rest before the fight."

Meanwhile Cuchulainn was preparing his battle array, and it was not long before Ferdiad's charioteer heard the noise of an approaching chariot. He awoke his master, and Ferdiad was ready to greet Cuchulainn as he reached the opposite bank of the stream.

"Welcome!" he said, "I am glad to meet you."

"I would rather it had been before," replied Cuchulainn, "for then we should have met in peace, and not in war. And I think, too, that you might have waited until *I* challenged *you*, and not have challenged me, since it is you who have come into my country, and not I into yours."

"True, Cuchulainn," said Ferdiad. "But I myself think that you are very arrogant in fighting with me at all, seeing that, when we were in Scathach's island, you used to be my servant, to take care of my spears and make my bed."

"That was a long time ago," replied Cuchulainn, "and there is no warrior in the world with whom I would not fight now. And we were equals even there, Ferdiad, except in age alone; we used to go to every battle together, and into every forest and wilderness side by side; we were heart-companions who faced darknesses and dangers together, and never found any one better than our two selves."

"That is true," said Ferdiad, "and therefore your first defeat will come from me. So do not remember those old times any more, for *I* am not going to think of them, or let them soften me."

"It would be better," replied Cuchulainn, "if we talked less, seeing that you have made up your mind

to fight. Yours is the first choice of arms, as you were at the ford first."

"Do you remember the missile weapons we used to practise with with Scathach?" asked Ferdiad.

"Certainly I remember them," replied Cuchulainn.

"Then, if you remember them, let us try them now," said Ferdiad. They took up their "missile shields", and "their eight turned handled spears, and their eight little quill spears, and their eight ivory-hilted swords, and their eight sharp ivory-handled spears". Across the ford these weapons went buzzing "like bees on the wing on a sunny day". But however well the champions cast, their defence was as good. Not a drop of blood was drawn on either side, and the weapons grew blunt from striking against the metal bosses of the shields. They continued this useless warfare till mid-day.

"Let us leave off trying these, Cuchulainn," said Ferdiad. "Our battle will never be ended like this."

Each cast down his missile weapons for his charioteer to collect.

"What shall we try now?" asked Ferdiad.

"It is still your turn to choose, for the whole day," replied Cuchulainn, "for you were at the ford first."

"Then let us fight with our long throwing-spears," said Ferdiad.

So from mid-day to evening their lances shot from bank to bank. But good as both were with their shields, their casting was better still. Though no great damage was done, each had received a wound.

"It is enough for one day, Cuchulainn," said Ferdiad, as the sun began to go down. "Let us give over until to-morrow."

"Let us, indeed," agreed Cuchulainn.

They threw aside their spears, and went unarmed to meet each other. Like all truly brave men, any bitterness which either of them might have had against the other in the morning had passed off during the day's fight. They embraced, and began to talk, while their charioteers and even their horses made friends. Cuchulainn arranged to send half the medicines and healing herbs which had been sent down to him from Emain across the ford to Ferdiad, while the Connaught champion handed over half the food and drink supplied him by Maive's purveyors. Doctors attended them, and staunched their wounds. Their charioteers chatted round a common fire; and so the night passed.

Early the next morning they met at the ford.

"What weapons do you choose, Ferdiad?" asked Cuchulainn.

"It is your turn to choose to-day," replied Ferdiad, "for I chose yesterday."

"Then let us fight from our chariots with our broad-headed stabbing-spears," answered Cuchulainn, "or we shall be no nearer the end of our combat this evening than we were yesterday."

They fought hand to hand, until each was red with blood, till their horses were tired out, and their drivers weary and dispirited.

"Let us stop now," said Cuchulainn, "for our horses and men are worn out; and if they are tired of it, surely we have a right to be tired of it too. We are not bound to go on fighting with the obstinacy of demons.¹ Let us make peace until to-morrow."

¹Literally, of the *Fomonach*, evil giants or demons of Gaelic mythology, who lived in perpetual struggle with the beneficent gods and goddesses.

"Let us make peace, indeed," agreed Ferdiad.

Again they kissed, and conversed like friends, before each went back to his bed of rushes to be attended to by the men of medicine. Their wounds, which had been but slight upon the day before, were deep and bloody now. But by the help of spells and charms the physicians stanchied the flow of blood, and patched them up as well as they could for the third day of the duel.

When they met again, Cuchulainn noticed a change in Ferdiad. His face was troubled, his eyes looked drowsy, his hair seemed to have grown darker.

"You do not look yourself to-day, Ferdiad," he said.

"If I do not, it is not through fear of you," replied his antagonist.

But the sight of him standing there looking so gloomy filled Cuchulainn with sadness.

"It is a pity," he said, "that you should have come like this, at a woman's bidding, to fight with your old friend and comrade."

"It is a pity," agreed Ferdiad; "but it is neither your fault nor mine. It is a man's destiny that leads him to the place where his grave is to be dug."

"You promised faithfulness to me long before you promised it to Maive," pleaded Cuchulainn. "And though you are fighting for Finnevar, it was not any love of you, but hatred of me that caused her to be promised to you. She has been offered to many other men before you, and a deadly gift she has been to all of them. And, Ferdiad, if it had been I who was in your place, I would not have drawn blood on you for the sake of any queen or princess in the world."

"In spite of all you say, Cuchulainn," replied Ferdiad, "I cannot go back without fighting to the end with you. I dare not meet the taunts of Maive if I have not done so. It is she, not you, Cuchulainn, who will have brought me to my death."

"Do not speak of your death," replied Cuchulainn. "My heart turns to a clot of blood, my strength seems to slip away from me at the thought of it."

"Let us not talk any more then," Ferdiad broke in. "What weapon do you choose to-day?"

"It is not my choice, but yours," replied Cuchulainn, "for I chose yesterday."

"Then let us take to our heavy swords, for this must be finished."

So each took his weightiest sword and his largest shield, and, all day, they hacked and hewed, struck and parried, till they were weary and stiff and faint with pain and loss of blood. And yet neither had conquered the other. So by mutual consent they threw aside their arms.

But their parting that night was not like that of the nights before. A cloud hung over each of them in the thought, the almost certain knowledge, that on the next day one or both of them must fall. Even their charioteers caught the infection of it; they no longer chatted by the same fire, nor put their horses into the same stall.

On the fourth morning of their combat, Ferdiad rose early, and armed himself with especial care. As we have already described Cuchulainn's armour and arms from the *Book of the Dun Cow*, let us also give Ferdiad's as it is set down in the hardly less ancient *Book of Leinster*.

"He put on his battle suit of combat," it says, "before the coming of Cuchulainn. And that battle-suit of combat was as follows: a kilt of striped silk with a border of spangled gold upon it, next his white skin. Outside, well sewed over it, an apron of brown leather on the lower part of his body. Over that again he put a huge stone as big as a mill-stone, to defend his body below. And above all he put on his firm deep apron of iron, of purified iron, over the great stone, through dread of the *gae bulga* on that day. Upon his head he wore his crested helmet of battle, on which were four gems, carbuncles, in each compartment; moreover, it was studded with *cruan* and crystal and carbuncles, and with brilliant rubies of the eastern world. In his right hand he took his destructive, sharp-pointed, strong spear, and on his left side hung his curved sword of battle, with its golden hilt, and its pommel of red gold. He slung on his back his huge, large-embossed, beautiful shield, on which were fifty bosses, each of which would bear the weight of a full-grown hog, not to mention the great central boss of red gold."¹

Thus equipped, he performed numerous dexterous feats while he waited for Cuchulainn.

Cuchulainn saw these deeds of sleight of hand, as he came down to the ford. Some of them he recognized as taught by Scathach; but others were new to him; for indeed Ferdiad himself had invented them that very morning.

"Those feats are to be tried on me," he said to Laeg. "I see that I shall have a hard fight of it. So, if I begin to yield, revile me with every bad name you can think of, until my rage is roused, and I make an end of

¹Translated by Mr. Standish Hayes O'Grady.

him. And if you see me winning, then encourage me with praise. For both will be needed."

Laeg promised to do this, as, indeed, he had done it for him often before.

"How shall we fight to-day?" asked Cuchulainn, after greetings had passed between him and Ferdiad; and his opponent reminded him that the right of choice was his.

"Then, since we have hitherto fought on dry land," said Cuchulainn, "let us now fight in the water of the ford."

And Ferdiad agreed, though with a heavy heart, for he knew that in the "Feat of the Ford", as fighting in the water was called, Cuchulainn had never yet met his match, nor had anyone who had tried it with him come out alive.

In this most famous of all the many famous fights of Irish saga, there was hardly anything to choose between the two antagonists. From dawn to mid-day they hurled their missile weapons. Then, as their battle-rage became more furious, they drew their swords and came to blows. Cuchulainn leaped from the edge of the ford, and landed upon the boss of Ferdiad's shield, straining up to strike off his head over the rim of it. But Ferdiad gave the shield a blow with his left elbow which flung Cuchulainn off as though he had been no heavier than a bird. Again he leaped upon the shield, but this time Ferdiad struck it with his left knee, and Cuchulainn was thrown back on to the brink of the stream, as helpless as a baby.

It was now that Laeg began to think that his master needed all the encouragement that his worst abuse could give.

“Alas, Cuchulainn!” he cried. “You will never be called a good or brave man again. Your enemy tosses you about as a river tosses its foam. In his hands you are like malt in a mill, like a tree before an axe, like a small bird chased by a hawk. You are nothing at all compared with him, you ghost, you spectre, you shadow!”

Then Cuchulainn, in his anger, sprang at Ferdiad’s shield again. But with one shake the Ivernian flung him off headlong into the middle of the ford.

He rose, and the final desperate fight began. So close were they that their heads, their feet, and their hands met as they struggled. They clove each other’s shields from rim to centre. They bent the blades of their spears and shivered their handles. They trampled in the water, as they hewed at one another, so that it splashed out in waves upon either bank. So loud was the noise of their combat that it was heard even in Maive’s camp, and filled strong men with fear.

And anyone who had been watching would have thought that the Ulster hero had met more than his match at last. Ferdiad pressed Cuchulainn so fiercely that he could hardly stand up before “his unguarded stout strokes, and his rapid strokes, and his tremendous heavy blows.” A well-directed thrust buried the sword deep in Cuchulainn’s body. Then, reeling and faint, our hero saw that he must play his last card. He called to Laeg to get the *gae bulga*, and float it down to him.

We have already heard of this strange water-weapon with its thirty barbs. When Ferdiad saw Cuchulainn make a pounce with his naked foot to pick it up, he put down his shield to save his lower limbs. But

"the unerring thorny spear" shot up over its upper rim, and struck Ferdiad through all his armour.

Instinctively he raised the shield to ward it off, though he knew that it was too late.

"It is enough," he said, "you have conquered me, Cuchulainn."

He staggered in the ford, and would have fallen, but Cuchulainn lifted him up and carried him to the bank. There he laid him down gently, and found that he was dead. In his sudden remorse, he grew almost as still and pale as Ferdiad himself; "a trance, and a faint, and a weakness fell on" him. In vain Laeg tried words of comfort. "What use is it for *me* to rise, if *he* lies dead?" cried the sorrow-stricken conqueror.

Then he broke out into generous praises of Ferdiad, into lamentations over his death, and execrations of Ailell and Maive who had brought him to it. It was no use for Laeg to remind his master that this victory over Ferdiad had been his hardest fight, and was therefore his greatest triumph.

"I would rather he had cut off my arms and my legs, and have remained alive himself," was Cuchulainn's answer.

And he kissed the dead lips.

"O Ferdiad!" he groaned, "why did you not ask the true advice of Fergus, or one of the exiles of Ulster, before you pledged yourself to fight with me? They would have persuaded you, and we might have still been friends. But now—great is the treachery that has brought you to your death!"

"Let us take away the golden brooch that Maive gave to him," suggested Laeg. But Cuchulainn would not.

“Do not touch it,” he said; “but you must take the *gue bulga* out of him, for I cannot leave it to my enemies.”

He turned aside his head, while Laeg cut out the gory spear.

“Let us go now,” he said, “before the men of Ireland come for him. Every fight I have been in before was a game and a sport, but this one will be like a cloud hanging over me for ever.”

And he went heavily and sorrowfully away.

CHAPTER XI

HOW THE WAR FOR THE BROWN BULL CAME TO AN END

PROBABLY Cuchulainn did wisely in retiring to his tent before Maive's people came to take up Ferdiad's body, for, wounded and weary as he was after so desperate a duel, he could have made small resistance, had they attacked him. As it was, they found no one at the ford but Ferdiad's charioteer bending over his master's body. Reverently they returned with the fallen warrior to Maive's encampment, and there they made as great a funeral for Ferdiad as the Trojans did for a hero not altogether unlike him—just as Cuchulainn is not unlike Achilles—the “horse-taming Hector”.

Meanwhile Conachar's physician had hard work to heal the wounds of Cuchulainn. Badly hurt as he had been before, after his fight with Loch, he was much more deeply wounded now. We are told that he could not bear to let his clothes touch his skin, but had to keep them off with little twigs, stuffing the spaces in between with dried grass and moss. It was in this sore plight that he was found by his father Sualtam, who, having struggled through his own sickness, had come down to look for him.

His grief on beholding his son's state was terrible, and he swore to avenge him. But Cuchulainn did not wish this; for he knew that Sualtam was not

the man to make a single-handed slaughter of warriors, as he himself or Fergus or Conall the Victorious might have done. "Sualtam's character", says the *Book of Leinster*, "in short was this: no hero was he, nor yet by any means a coward, but just an average good fighting-man." We do not find his name among Ulster's Twelve Chief Champions, nor, probably, should we have ever heard of him, had it not been for his famous son. So Cuchulainn would not let him throw away his life.

"No," he said, "do not stop to avenge me, but, if you love me, go in all haste to Emain Macha, and tell Conachar that, if he wishes to save his kingdom, he must do it now. For three months I have stood alone against an army and held it back, slaying a warrior every day, but now I have hardly a whole place upon me from crown to sole. I have done all I can, and if Ulster does not rise and help herself now, she will be destroyed for ever."

So Sualtam mounted Cuchulainn's famous horse, the Gray of Macha, and rode furiously to Emain. He paused outside the walls to shout: "Men are being killed, women carried off, cattle lifted in Ulster!" Getting no answer, he galloped through the gate into the fort itself, and repeated his warning. But no one stirred, or appeared to take any notice, so he rode his horse into Conachar's hall, where the king sat in drowsy lethargy among his druids and warriors.

"Men are being killed, women carried off, cattle lifted in Ulster!" he cried.

Cathbad the druid turned a weary eye on him.

"By whom?" he asked, languidly.

"By Ailell, King of Connaught, with men from all Ireland," replied Sualtam. "Everywhere they are en-

slaving your people and lifting your kine. There is no one to keep them back except my son Cuchulainn, who for three months has fought alone against four provinces. But now his limbs are almost parted asunder with wounds, and he cannot protect you any more."

But Cathbad did not take in the meaning of Sualtam's warning.

"Do you not know," he said, "that the punishment for a man who disturbs the king's rest is death?"

The weary Ultonians murmured assent. But Sualtam was so enraged at this reception of his message that he turned indignantly away. And perhaps he was not a very good horseman, or else, in his anger, he pulled too sharply at the bridle for the proud spirit of the Gray of Macha. For the war-horse started, and leaped into the air so swiftly and suddenly that Sualtam's arm which held his round buckler was jerked violently upwards. It was usual in those days to make the rims of shields as sharp as possible, so that they might also be used to strike with; Cuchulainn's, we remember, "would cut hairs against the stream". At any rate, Sualtam's shield came with such force against its bearer's neck that it chopped off his head.

And tradition says, though we need not believe it unless we like, that, though severed from its body, Sualtam's head continued to cry out: "Men are being killed, women carried off, cattle lifted in Ulster!"

So startling an incident changed at last the spirit of King Conachar's sickly dream. With a great effort he threw off the last traces of his weakness, and his men, too, struggled to their feet. The king slapped his hand on the shoulder of his son Finchad.

“Go and rally Ulster,” he cried, “for I swear that, unless the heavens fall and crush us, or the earth gives way beneath our feet and buries us, or the sea bursts its bounds and drowns us, I will avenge every man and rescue every woman and bring every cow back to her own stall!”

Then there was great stir of preparation, not only in Emain but throughout all Ulster. From north and south, east and west came the mustering hosts, every head of a clan with his fighting-men. King Conachar led his thirty hundred chariot-chiefs; the proud prince of Fermoy, Owen, son of Durthact, brought a battalion equal to Conachar’s own; the youthful hero Conall, with his strange eyes, one blue as a blue-bell and the other as black as a beetle’s back, headed his own corps; Laegaire the Battle-Winner came with a band whose furious advance filled all who saw it with terror; Celthair, son of Uthecar, in his rough shirt and his shaggy cloak fastened with its iron pin, called the men of Dunlethglaisi from the north, and from the north, too, came the champion stone-thrower, Muinremar; Cathbad and his company of druids marched along, uttering spells against the elements to bind them to their service and their enemies’ harm; Sencha the Orator used his loud voice and fiery words to hearten men for war; and a score of other heroes famous in Ulster story each brought his battalion. Above all, sick and sore as he was, Cuchulainn, who had come to meet the tribesmen of Dundéalgan, drove the Gray of Macha and the Black of Sainglen southward again for vengeance.

Down marched the great army, with the roar of rolling chariot wheels, the tramp of shod hoofs, the ring of

bridles, the crack of whips, the rattle and clatter of swords in their scabbards, spears in their sockets, and shields against armoured backs. With them they brought an engine of war called a "Faggot of Spears", apparently a great beam running on wheels and studded with blades and spikes, which, pushed from behind against a rank of armed men, would break into, overthrow, and shatter it. So loud was the noise of their coming that all the wild animals in the country fled before them across the open plains.

"There is thick mist with thunder and lightning before us," was the report of one of Maive's scouts who saw their advance from far off. But the mist was made by the breaths of a host rising in the chill air, the lightning was the flicker of their weapons, and the thunder the noise of their advance.

Ailell was half in mind to order a retreat before this great host, especially as Fergus, who must have been at times a considerable annoyance to his Connaught friends, prophesied openly that no army would be able to stand before the men of Ulster when they at last shook off their weakness. But he remembered a proverb which said that it was "no good king's trick to do a good run away", and decided to remain and offer pitched battle on the plain between the two hills of Gairech and Ilgairech. Heralds passed between the armies, and a truce was made till the next day. The hosts encamped opposite to one another, waiting for the dawn, and between them, we are told, hovered the Battle Goddess in the shape of a carrion-crow, gloating over the coming carnage, and uttering a song of which the burden was: "Ravens shall pick the necks of men".

Sencha, the royal orator, had been ordered by King

Conachar to keep the last watch of the night, and, when day was fully come, to arouse the men of Ulster with his stentorian voice. Silent he stood until the sun had risen over the hills and glens. Then out broke the Ulster war-song, "Let Macha's kings arise".

Every one awoke. So hurriedly did the Ultonians rise that, the tale tells, those whose tents were not pitched directly opposite to the enemy broke through them sideways rather than waste time in going round to the door. They mustered in front of their camp. And, on the other side, Ailell called forth all his captains by name.

Only one of the greater Ulster chiefs was not with his company. It had been decided in council that Cuchulainn, already wounded as he was, should not be allowed to come into the battle, however much he might wish to. Against his will they detained him in his tent. When he struggled to come out, they bound him to his bed with hooks, clasps, and ropes. They set Laeg to keep guard over him, and Cuchulainn, helpless now, could only charge his charioteer to watch the battle and tell him how it went.

Foremost in the attack was Conachar himself, leading his three thousand chariots. Maive had conceived what she thought was an ingenious plan to entrap the Ulster king, and, if possible, capture him alive. She prepared what she called a "man-fold", in which she hoped to pen him and his company like a flock of sheep. Her main army was drawn up in a three-sided formation, consisting of a centre with flanking wings, behind which were to lie in hiding a picked body of three thousand men. Maive and Ailell themselves were to lead the centre, and to challenge King Conachar. Then, when he

charged down in answer, the flanks were to advance and swing round, while the reserved three thousand rushed up and so entirely surrounded him and his men.

The device succeeded perfectly, so far as its scheme was concerned. But they had underrated Conachar's bravery and the terrible rush of so large a squadron of scythed chariots. Strong as Maive's centre was, his charge broke it, leaving a wall of dead on either hand, and, cutting their way clean through, they made a circuit of the Connaught army and returned to their own ranks. It was afterwards a current proverb in Ulster that the proposal for taking Conachar and three thousand of his champions alive was one of the "three most abundantly comical sayings" uttered during the Raid.

However, the men of Erin quickly rallied, and attacked in their turn. Three times running they routed Ulster, and drove her warriors northwards in confusion. But the bringing into action of the effective, if cumbrous, "Faggot of Spears" turned the scale of the fight, and Ulster not only recovered her position, but, in turn, routed the men of Erin.

Maive, in her anxiety, now called upon Fergus to go himself into battle. The exiled Ulsterman had not as yet taken any personal share in the Raid at all, except in his mock combat with Cuchulainn. His part had been merely that of a skilled adviser, with especial knowledge of Ulster. But here at last he felt obliged to bear a hand. He called for his famous sword "Hard-Bulging", and joined Ailell and Maive.

"Spare no one," begged the queen. "unless it be some very old friend."

The assault of Fergus, swinging his terrible two-handed sword, again turned the swaying fortunes of the fight. Wherever he went he made a gap in Ulster's ranks, through which the Connaught men followed him. At last he gained the centre of the army, where Conachar commanded.

When the king saw Fergus, he threw up his great gold-horned shield, the "Shouter". Fergus pressed forward, swinging "Hard-Bulging".

"Who is the man," he cried, "that lifts this shield against me?"

"A better man than you," was the answer from behind it. "The man who sent you out of Ulster to shelter with the deer and fox, and who will turn you back now, before all the men of Ireland."

Down came the great sword, and the magic shield gave its mighty shout for help. Fergus raised his weapon for a second blow. But, as he did so, Cormac, Conachar's exiled son, caught him by both arms, and Fergus, suddenly seized with shame at having lifted his hand against his step-son and former king, turned aside to find someone else upon whom to wreak his fury.

The great cry of the shield had been heard far beyond the limits of the battle. It came to Cuchulainn as he lay bound on his bed.

"That is the shout of Conachar's shield for help," he cried, "and I am not near him!"

In his agony and wrath, he struggled so that he burst the ropes and bonds that tied him, and, thrusting Laeg aside and snatching up his arms, he went limping off to the fray.

Suddenly he remembered the claim he had upon Fergus, that bargain of his to run away when asked

to. Now, if ever, would the flight of the tall hero bring relief to Ulster, and confusion to Connaught! He hobbled across the battle-field, calling out his foster-father's name.

Fergus heard it, and came to see who wanted him.

"Turn and meet me, my friend Fergus," was the cry he heard, "and I will wash you as a river washes the foam on it, I will go over you as the tail goes over the cat's back, I will smite you as a fond mother smites her son."¹

"Who is speaking such big words to me?" he shouted in answer. "Let me see him."

"You shall see him," cried Cuchulainn, as he came into view, "and flee before him. Do you remember your promise to run away from me whenever I asked you to? I claim fulfilment of that promise now."

Fergus was reluctant, but bound to obey.

"Yes, I remember it," he said. "You ran away from *me* when you were in your full strength, so I will run away from *you* now that you are crippled and hurt."

Without another word, he turned tail. And when the men of Ireland saw his tall figure in flight, they believed that the day was lost, and broke, and ran in rout, like a herd of strayed horses.

The battle was over, lost to Connaught. Maive's one care now was to get the Brown Bull for which all this blood had been shed away before the men of Ulster could recapture it. Hastily she ordered it to be driven towards Connaught, while, with Ailell, six of her sons, and nine hundred men, she turned to meet the Ultonians who were pursuing her beaten army.

¹ These quaint expressions are in the original Irish.

The valour of her little party saved the day. The men of Ulster were checked, and the flying host escaped with its spoil. But almost all Maive's men were killed, and she and Ailell and her sons would hardly have come out of it themselves but for Cuchulainn's chivalry. He spared their lives, and gave them a safe-conduct to rejoin their defeated army, which scarcely halted until it had reached Cruachan.

And here, while they waited to see whether Ulster would push her victory into a counter-invasion, or whether it would be safe for Connaught to disband her allies, something happened which turned everyone's thoughts another way.

The Brown Bull, driven out of his native Ulster into the strange land of Connaught, bellowed so loudly that the White-horned heard it, and hurried out of his pasture-land to meet his rival. His coming gave the fierce chiefs a new idea.

"Let them fight before us," was the cry, "each for the honour of his province; the Brown Bull for Ulster, and the White-horned Bull for Connaught."

So all the hosts that Maive had gathered, both Gaels and Ivernians, men from Connaught, from Meath, from Munster, and from Leinster, as well as the Ulster exiles, assembled to see this battle of the two best bulls in Ireland. It was decided that someone should be appointed to follow them wherever they went, and watch them carefully, so as to be able to hand down to future times the full story of their combat. The choice fell upon Bricriu "Poison Tongue", who, being a guest at Cruachan when the war broke out, had not been allowed to return to Ulster. Then the noble beasts were set face to face, and Cormac, Conachar's son, gave the Brown

Bull three resonant whacks with his spear, to remind him that Ulster's glory now lay in his keeping.

They lowered their heads and tore at the ground; then crashed together, each trying to overthrow and rend the other. Their eyes shone like a smith's coals, their nostrils opened and closed like a smith's bellows. To and fro they trampled—charging, thrusting, fending, and goring. And once they turned so suddenly that Bricriu, who was standing close to them, had not time to get out of their way, and they ran over him, trampling him into the earth, which was the end of him and his evil tongue.

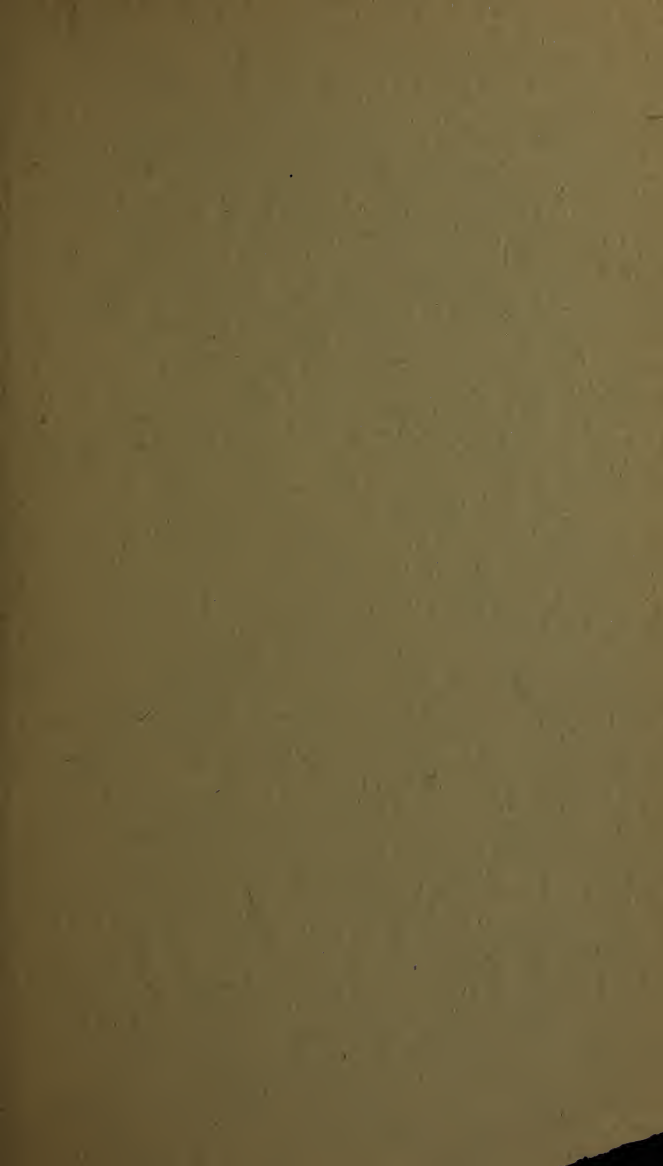
Then night fell, the battle still undecided. But, right through it, the host could hear the two bulls stamping and snorting in the dark. When day came, they saw the Brown Bull alone, bearing something upon his horns which was all that was left of his rival—the liver and a loin. He was striding across the plain north-eastwards towards Ulster.

Maive's sons sprang to their arms, burning to avenge their bull; but Fergus swore that whoever tried to touch the Brown Bull must fight with him. So the victorious beast went his way unharmed. At a place on the Shannon he stopped to drink, and, as he lowered his head, the loin fell off, and the spot has ever since borne the name of Athlone, that is *Ath Luain*, the "Ford of the Loin". It was not until he got to Meath that the liver also fell, at a place called Trim, formerly *Ath Truim*, the "Ford of the Liver".

Thence he climbed the mountains of Bray, and, looking down, saw his own hills of Cooley. A great joy seized him, and he ran at topmost speed towards them, slaying, in his wild flight, all who crossed his path. But he

reached them in vain, for his exertions in the fight and on his great homeward rush had been too much for him, and, as he gained the first hillock, and turned to give a bellow of joy, his heart broke, and he fell dead.

So ends the greatest saga of ancient Ireland, a story of almost Homeric grandeur, that of the Cattle Raid of Cooley, and the exploits of Cuchulainn in it.





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